

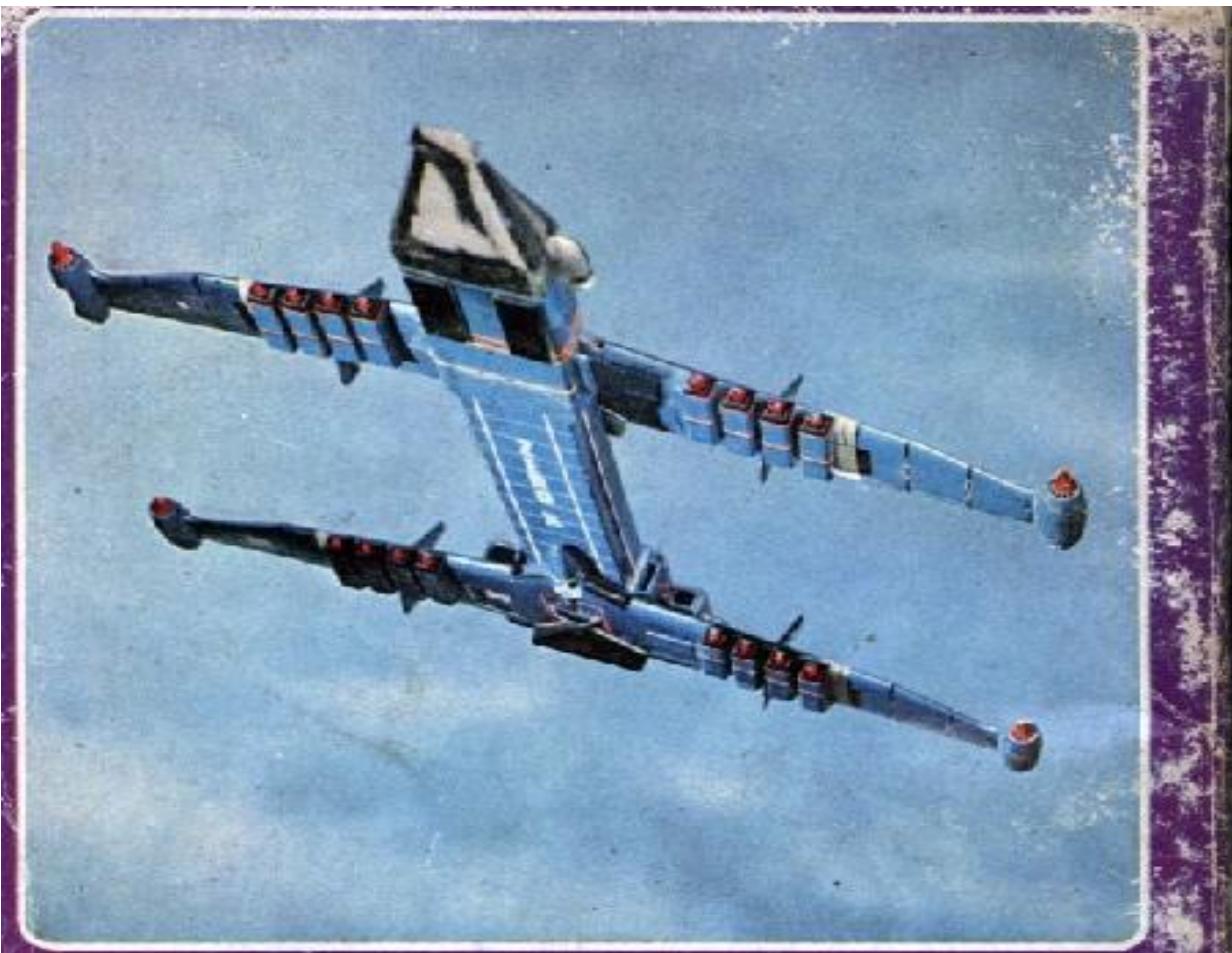
# THUNDERBIRDS ARE GO



ARMADA  
PERRACKS for  
Boys & Girls

by Gerry and  
Sylvia Anderson

2/6



The Tracys in space! When the Hood threatens space craft Zero X, International Rescue agrees to help. Smart work by Lady Penelope and her chauffeur, Parker, foils the Hood's second sabotage attempt. Zero X reaches Mars to face new and terrible dangers, fire-breathing 'rock-snakes'. Badly damaged, can Zero X avoid a crash? There is only one last chance!

All the Tracy boys — Scott, Virgil, John, Gordon and Alan — are involved. Their courage and resource, the genius of Brains, the quick thinking of Lady Penelope, the scientific miracles of the Thunderbirds' equipment are all tested to the full in this thrilling new story.

## **THUNDERBIRDS ARE GO**

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# **Thunderbirds Are Go**

*A STORY BY ANGUS P. ALLAN*

*Based on the film by GERRY and SYLVIA ANDERSON*

TEXT ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES WATSON



ARMADA  
PAPERBACK  
for Boys & Girls

# CHAPTER ONE

“WHAT YOU ARE WITNESSING, viewers, is the first practical step in the realisation of one of man’s greatest dreams.”

The World Television commentator paused for effect, well aware that in cities and villages all over the globe, people would be craning forward to their sets, eager for their first glimpse of the astonishing vehicle about to make the first manned journey to the planet Mars.

“Zero X!” The words came slowly, dramatically, as the cameras pulled back to leave the commentator a tiny pin-man, dwarfed by the immense concrete hangar at Glenn Field spaceport.

For a moment, the picture remained immobile, as though it might have been a film still. And then one slab-end of the enormous building began to sink smoothly into the ground, until its flat top was exactly level with the metalled runway. Something inside the hangar began to move, and now the blunt nose and the long rectangular body began to run out on its sixteen-coupled pairs of gigantic wheels, the sun glinting off polished metal facets.

“It certainly is some craft! ”

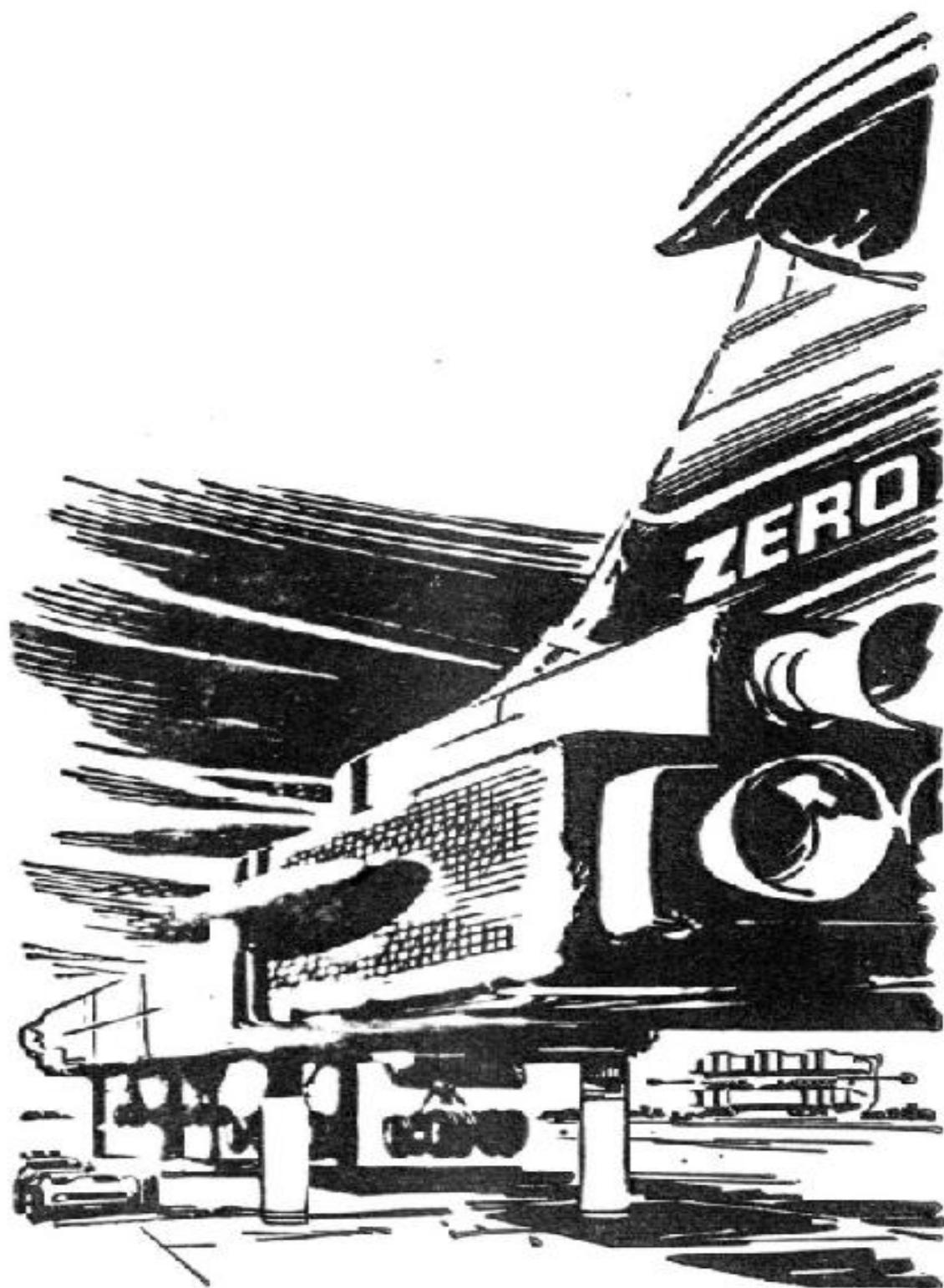
Jeff Tracy breathed the words almost reverently into the silence of the lounge in his Pacific island home. The villa headquarters of the International Rescue Organisation, had been alive with excitement all morning, each member of the household impatiently waiting for the Zero X telecast to begin.

Four of Jeff Tracy's five sons were there in the lounge with him. Scott, standing with whitened knuckles resting on the back of his father's chair, Virgil, perched on the desk, arms folded. Alan and Gordon on the edge of the studio couch, leaning forward expectantly. And Brains, the brilliant scientist of the Thunderbird team, his eyes behind the thick glasses betraying none of his admiration for the colossal space craft. Tin-Tin, his slim Eurasian assistant, standing just behind him beside her father, Kyrano, Jeff Tracy's old and faithful retainer.

"Two years it's taken to build," murmured Scott. "The cost must have been immense."

"The gain will be—er—equally immense," stammered Brains. "The whole c-conquest of outer space begins right here."

Now Alan's animated face switched round towards the scientist, and his hand pointed excitedly to the flickering screen. "Look at this! They're about to begin the assembly procedure. Isn't it fantastic?" From the wall of the lounge, the portrait of John Tracy, Jeff's fifth son, stared unseeingly down. But far above the earth, where the young astronaut was doing his monthly tour of duty on the orbiting satellite, Thunderbird 5, John, too, was standing with his eyes glued to the monitor tele-screen.



... the long main body of Zero X . . . supported clear  
of its wheels on fat hydraulic rams.

In the control tower at Glenn Field, the Central Controller looked out through the panoramic windows of the vast arena far below him. The complex of hangars, the long main body of Zero X, now supported clear of its wheels on fat hydraulic rams.

Evenly, as if this were just another routine day, the Controller spoke into the microphones on the console surrounding him.

“Zero X in position on launch apron. Radio controlled lifting body 1 to take station.”

From a hangar at the extreme edge of the field, a huge flat shape like a pair of delta wings on twin undercarriages began to move out across the apron. It turned until it was directly in front of Zero X. Then the tips of its wings hinged downwards, lifting the whole flat span higher than the main body.

The whine of motors changed tone, and the lifting body backed over the forward part of Zero X and dropped into position.

“Radio controlled lifting body 2 to launch position.” The Controller’s voice again.

The second wing-span, almost the twin of the first, moved across and slid under the tail section of the main craft. Then the big rams beneath Zero X began to sink into the apron, and the solid ‘thunk’ of locking machinery bonded the three separate components of the space ship together.

The Controller nodded with satisfaction and shifted his position on his seat. “This is Assembly Control. Phase One now completed. The Zero X Martian excursion will be joining the main ship at zero minus five. This is Assembly Control closing down.”

Confidently, he stabbed a button on the console, and the whole control centre began to sink from the tower-summit like a giant, self-contained lift.

It came to rest in central control, a large, circular room with a recessed, rectangular compartment opening out to the controller's right.

In the recess, seated at a floor-mounted block of instruments, were three men in light blue uniforms, the letters ZX on their shoulder flashes. Their faces, relaxed and immobile, turned to the Controller.

He nodded. "Paul, Greg, Brad." The Controller would like to have said something off-the-cuff. Some sort of friendly, personal reassurance to these three men, about to embark into the unknown. But where are the words you can use at such a moment? Instead, he coughed and glanced away from them, repeating the text of the prepared notes it had been his job to learn.

"This is a tough assignment. If this mission is successful you will be the first men to land on Mars. This project has been the most costly yet devised by man."

He paused, but they were still looking at him silently, expectantly.

"However ..." now the Controller looked at each man in turn, straight in the eye. "However, the safety of the crew and passengers still takes top priority. You are free to cancel the mission at any stage, and must abort in an emergency. Is that clearly understood? Captain Paul Travers?"

The blond, crag-faced pilot nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Space Captain Greg Martin?"

The second-in-command's dark, humorous face inclined slightly. "Yes, sir."

"Space Navigator Brad Newman?"

"Yes, sir."

The Controller swivelled round and jabbed a button on the panel in front of him.

"Doctor Grant... Doctor Pierce. Can you hear me?"

In the small Passenger Launch Compartment of Zero X, the two scientists to accompany the Martian expedition nodded—even though they were out of video contact with control.

"Loud and clear, Controller."

"Please acknowledge that it is clearly understood that the decisions of Captain Paul Travers will be accepted without question at all times."

"Affirmative." The scientists' voices crackled together over the intercom.

There was a sudden, empty feeling in the pit of the Controller's stomach as he cut radio contact. He looked down at his hands, surprised that they weren't actually shaking. Then, suddenly, he said: "Okay. Away you go. And good luck!"

Captain Paul Travers touched a switch on his chair, and all three crewmen swivelled round to turn their backs on control. Then the whirring of hidden machinery, and the whole floor beneath them slid forward and away from the control tower. For the room in which they were sitting was actually the Martian Excursion Vehicle—the key part of Zero X.

With the eyes of the viewing world upon them, the three men in the M.E.V. settled themselves in their control cabin amidst the mass of instruments so familiar to them after two years of extensive training.

The voice of the Controller was still with them... but now it was an impersonal, metallic sound over the radio.

“Zero X Martian Excursion Vehicle, all check lights are green. All ground stations fully operational, all fuel systems are go. It is now lift-off minus two, and you are clear to join main ship.”

Watchers on the edge of the launch apron saw the dip-nosed projection that had actually seemed to be part of the central control tower move forward away from the building. Move forward and trundle across to the waiting bulk of Zero X.

“Steady! Steady! Cut forward impulse.” Navigator Brad Newman’s eyes never left the flickering needles of the gauges in front of him.

Paul Travers obediently transferred the instructions to the finger-touch controls beneath his hands. He felt as though his hands were machines themselves—extensions of a co-ordinated whole. This was right. This was what they’d been taught, these three pioneer astronauts. There was no individuality. These three were one. A unit.

“Reverse impulse.”

Now the M.E.V. backed slowly up to the main body, and locked into position.

“Central Control, this is Zero X flight deck, ready to receive nose cone.” There was the merest hint of satisfaction deep down in the pilot’s eyes.

A mirror-polished, arrow-headed cone rose from the launch apron directly in front of the M.E.V.

Mechanical arms guided it to the lock-face and clapped it into position.

“Central Control announcing Phase Two complete. Zero X assembled for lift-off. It is now lift-off minus one.”

The Tracys, like millions of other viewers, were finding the tension hard to take. Perhaps it was worse for the men of International Rescue. They at least knew first-hand of the apprehension that must have been lurking beneath the calm exteriors of the Zero X crew. They knew all the dangers of untested space flight....

“Gee, I wish I were going up with them, father.” Gordon, the young aquanaut in charge of submarine vessel Thunderbird 4, thumped his right fist into the palm of his left hand. “Just being a spectator’s crippling me.”

“Listen to the commentator,” grinned Virgil. “He’s almost as steamed up as you are, little brother.”

It was true. The man on the television screen was using the sort of voice you only hear from sports reporters at football matches, when the last second of the match looks like producing the winning goal.

“It’s the greatest project in history! It’s going to start any moment now! Just listen to the silence, viewers... just listen to it! And in just fifty seconds the giant turbo ram jets on the two lifting bodies will fire! ”

The man made an obvious effort to calm down. “Viewers, these engines will accelerate the ship to supersonic speed and take it to the fringe of space. Then, their jobs completed,

the lifting bodies will part company with the main fuselage and return to earth under remote radio control. Simultaneously, the ship's chemical engines will fire and take it up to escape velocity."

The TV screen was showing a close-up of the double-banked thrust jets at the very rear of Zero X.

"Once in space, Zero X will switch to arc-jet engines producing a speed that will enable the rocket to reach its destination in six weeks. Yes... just *six weeks!*"

"An incredible feat, if it's pulled off." Scott Tracy found himself muttering the words, and flushed guiltily. The others were looking round at him accusingly, as though he'd spoken some evil omen. "I mean... that is, it's *got* to come off," he faltered.

The commentator was at it again, his voice scaling crazily as his camera trolley was finally swung clear and manoeuvred to the edge of the launch apron.

"I can see the countdown lights! Five seconds... four... three... two... one...."

The shock blast as the ram jets fired made the whole of Glenn Field shudder. Multiple streaks of flame seared from the hind cowlings and thrust the great craft forward. Slowly... slowly... and now the perceptible increase in speed. The director of the TV camera team shouting and raving as his men struggled to keep Zero X in their picture... the roaring wind that swept across the tarmac in the wake of the ship....

And then the deafening thunderclap as the nose lifted, and the whole machine flung itself upwards into the air ... a fantastically steep climb into the sun that made the watchers

on the ground dance with exasperation. Zero X was invisible against the blinding glare.

Captain Paul Travers kept half his mind concentrated beneath his fingers. The other half ran through the routine he had to follow. "Central Control from Zero X. Height, 20,000 feet. Air speed . . ." (he wondered briefly how they'd receive the sonic boom down on the ground) "... Mach One."

Travers turned his head towards Brad Newman. "Commence chemical engine countdown on green light."

"Roger."

Greg Martin glanced quickly up from his own set of instruments. "Course deviation shows four Captain."

Paul Travers nodded. "Okay. Adjust. Left... left...."

Greg Martin moved his control column fractionally to one side. The movement was transmitted along control rods, through universal joints and into the elevator system in one of the wing lifting bodies. A flap lowered imperceptibly, and the deviation was corrected.

But in the back of Paul Travers's mind, a tiny question formed, waiting for its answer. "Why had there been a deviation? Why should adjustment have been necessary?" Travers realised that the question was unanswerable. Just one of the tiny gremlins, perhaps ... the sort of thing that always happens, no matter how carefully machinery is constructed and programmed....

"Aw, well—the course is okay now." He realised he'd muttered the words aloud.

If Paul Travers could have seen into the offending lifting body, his worries would have been magnified a millionfold. There was nothing inaccurate about the machinery at all. The fantastic secret machinery that the world's top scientists had worked on for years. The fault had been extra weight... the hundred and eighty pounds of a squat man in a black flying suit, crouched there in the restricted spaces within the wing compartment, a whirring camera in his hands recording every detail of the mechanical complex!

For this was the man known only as 'The Hood', the mystery mastermind of a thousand faces whose criminal activities had made him the most wanted personality in the world!

The evil genius chuckled to himself as he moved cautiously through the lifting body, stepping gingerly between levers and rods to get at the remotest of the mechanisms. With details of this kind of equipment in his possession, his dreams of world mastery and power could begin to come true....

In the control cabin above, Paul Travers was maintaining his steady running commentary to Glenn Field. "This is Zero X. Height now 100,000 feet, increasing rate of ascent to 6,000 feet a minute prior to releasing lifting bodies."

"This is Central Control at Glenn Field. Roger." A moment's pause.

"Critical rate of ascent achieved."

Paul Travers turned to Greg Martin. "Okay. Commence separation procedure."

Greg's fist closed over a knurled lever, and he thrust it forward decisively... but in the lifting body, the control rods that should have closed together jammed!

The Hood's camera slipped from his nerveless fingers and shattered to pieces. The arch-criminal's face contorted with pain, and his mouth opened in a scream of agony. His right boot was immovably compressed between the straining metal rods!

"Elevator control's jammed!" Greg Martin lifted his astonished face to Captain Travers.

"Jammed? Can't you free it?"

Martin wrestled with the lever, but it wouldn't budge an inch. He couldn't know that every wrench he gave transmitted excruciating pain to the sinister stowaway beneath them.

Then, with a superhuman effort born of sheer desperation. The Hood managed to tug his foot free of the boot. He fell back weakly, his face under the disguise mask blanched and trembling. He watched, his senses swimming, as the whining machinery brought the rods closer, mashing the leather of the boot into a pulp. Smoke drifted up as operating circuits burned out with the excessive strain of their load.

"It's no use, Captain." Greg Martin spread his hands and stared helplessly at Travers. "She moved a fraction... but she's still fouled. There's nothing we can do!"

Paul Travers roared with impotent fury. "There's got to be! Someone get down there and see what's wrong!"

"We can't, Paul." Brad Newman used his superior's Christian name for the first time in his life. "Hang it, you know the orders!"

Travers whirled on his subordinate. "For Pete's sake! Aren't you forgetting yourself?" And then, "I'm sorry, Brad. But the

tension! Two whole years of it... and now this! Some footling little fault— a minute's repair work, maybe...

"And maybe not," broke in Greg Martin. "It could be serious. The trouble might snowball. Come on, Captain. It's bitter, but we've gotta swallow it. Call control."

His jaw working with anger, Captain Travers thumbed the radio button as though it were his worst enemy. "Central Control, this is Zero X. Our elevating gear's jammed. We can't drop the lifting bodies. I'm ejecting nosecone."

One wing dipping over, Zero X levelled off and began to dive as the Captain flung over the controls. Inside the lifting body, The Hood swung off balance and tripped wildly over the machinery. His hand struck against a solenoid bolt, and a maintenance hatch snapped open beneath him. Sweat dripped from his face now, for his rubber disguise mask had slipped off, and lay unheeded behind him.

Feverishly, The Hood felt behind him to ensure that his parachute pack was free of any hindrance, and then he began to haul himself against the screaming slipstream that roared in through the opening.

Far below, in the control tower at Glenn Field, the Controller spoke rapidly into his radio. He had already thrown the switch to open wavelength, so that all contact was monitored direct to Martian Exploration Centre headquarters and to World Government House. Somewhere outside, red lights would be winking, and security men would be tactfully clearing the base of all press and television personnel.

"Zero X, this is Central Control. What is your speed and rate of descent? Over."

"Zero X to Control. Rate of descent 3,000 per minute. Air-speed Mach One point Four."

Rapidly, the Controller fed the information to the computer at his side and began to depress a series of calculator buttons. Within seconds, an illuminated screen behind him lit up to reveal a trace-line exactly duplicating the angle of glide of the stricken space craft.

"Bearing 276 magnetic, distance 172 miles." The Controller spoke the words to himself before he turned once more to the intercommunicating radio system.

"Control to Zero X. What's the situation?"

The voice of Paul Travers. "We are still unable to free the elevating system. Am ordering crew and passengers to eject. Repeat, eject."

The Controller forced himself to think calmly. "Roger, Zero X. I have your forecast crash position. Do not eject until you are at one thousand feet. Am despatching Air Sea Rescue immediately."

"Okay, Control. Roger and out."

Moments later, from bases on the Western coastline of America, six catapult jets hurtled upwards from their launchers, the men at their controls confident in their mission, but each one heavy with sympathy for the crushing let-down of the men in Zero X. And behind the aircraft, its cumbersome speed ludicrous in contrast with that of the space ship, a triple-rotor helicopter, full of the medical aid that everyone hoped would not be necessary....

Helpless now, the controls haywire, Zero X was standing on its nose in a practically vertical dive. The nose cone ejected,

Paul Travers could see the ocean far below him. The sight made him feel sick inside. Soon—a matter of minutes—the impassive water would be its old calm self. But beneath it, somewhere on the sea bed, there'd be twisted wreckage. Utterly unrecognisable. The fish that swam around it would never understand that this was all that remained of... what was it? The greatest project in man's history....

He was alone on the flight-deck now. Seconds before, he had ordered Greg Martin and Brad Newman aft, to join the two scientists, Doctors Grant and Pierce. They'd be nervous now, that was for sure. Men of the laboratory—the sort who trusted established chemical formulae... equations. Now they'd be pinning their hopes on a human being. "Me. Good old Paul Travers, with all his worldly failings!" The Captain grinned mirthlessly, then suddenly angry with his own words. This was typical. The ridiculous self-pity and self-criticism that all mortal men indulge in when they're faced with the collapse of a personal dream.

"Gotta pull myself together," he muttered. "Greg." Now he spoke into the intercom. "Everyone ready in the escape unit?"

Greg Martin crouched with the others in the little cylindrical capsule, slung like a bomb beneath the main body of Zero X. It was awkward to twist round, the way he was strapped into one of the five padded couches, but just the same, he made sure. Young Brad. He looked okay. Yes, he nodded. And the securing harness on the two white-faced scientists looked okay. "Everything's in position, Paul," he said evenly.

"Okay, Greg. I'm coming back now."

Paul Travers flipped a lever beside him, and his seat slid back along recessed ramps into a narrow corridor. Then he was

with the others, and the sealing door of the escape unit slid shut.

The Captain glanced up at an altimeter on the wall by his head. "Fifteen hundred feet," he read aloud. "Stand by. Any minute now, we'll eject." None of the men in the capsule had any idea that, at that very moment, a small black shape dropped from the maintenance hatch in the forward lifting body. Zero X dived on to its fate, while The Hood drifted gently away under his billowing parachute....

"Altimeter registers fourteen hundred. Thirteen fifty. Thirteen... stand by!" Travers heard the edge in his own voice.

*"Go!"* He hit the button beside him, and the escape unit shot clear of Zero X, a huge red and white parachute streaking behind it to pull it up short and carry it, spinning gently, down towards the sea.

And then, seconds later, the huge space craft struck. The unresisting sea swallowed the knife-edge of the nose, and for a split instant, the bulk of Zero X seemed to stand there, like a statue embedded in concrete. Then the shock of the impact shivered the whole construction to fragments, even as a series of shattering explosions blasted metal, oil and water into an incredible mushroom of red and black destruction.

The surface was still in raging turmoil as the escape capsule made its splashdown, and the relaxing canopy of the parachute fluttered lazily down into the water...

# CHAPTER TWO

THREE SHARP RAPS of the President's hammer silenced the low murmur of voices around the big conference table in the Enquiry Room of the Martian Exploration Centre.

The twelve delegates swivelled slowly towards the man who sat at their head. He looked complacent. Pleased with himself as he stretched his hands out and drummed his fingers on the folder of papers in front of him.

His raised eyebrows seemed to ask: "Have I everyone's full attention?" and then his face relaxed, and he opened the proceedings.

"Gentlemen, you have now had time to study the very fine report that has been produced by our aviation investigators. We at this establishment wish to thank those concerned for their untiring efforts in this direction."

The President picked up the papers in front of him ... his copy of the report that every member of the assembly possessed... and tapped with it against his blotter.

"Although the report runs to eight hundred and twenty-six pages and meticulously describes every happening that led up to the crash of Zero X twenty-four months ago, the conclusion is all too simple. In fact, gentlemen, it can be summed up in just one word. *Sabotage.*"

The delegates fidgeted restlessly. This much they knew already. To most of them, this was just a tiresome meeting. Possibly it would mean a shorter lunch hour. Someone cracked his knuckles impatiently.

The President droned on. "Before we progress further with this business, I would ask you all to register a vote of confidence in the findings of this very fine report." He looked up, imperiously, and one by one, the delegates began to move for the two buttons in front of each of them. One tangerine button, one black.

As a buzz of conversation broke out in the room, the President swivelled round to a lighted wall-indicator behind him, and smiled to himself as a column of tangerine dots began to build up in a column marked 'for'.

There were twelve spaces, and each one was filled. None of the black dots in the 'against' column came up.

"Thank you, gentlemen," intoned the President. "I appreciate your unanimous support. Now, as you know, it is exactly two years since the disaster. In eight weeks time, Earth will once again be in a suitable position in relation to Mars to make the second attempt. Can I take it that I have your approval for this too?"

Once again, the lights began to climb the board. Five... ten... eleven. But there they stopped, and suddenly there was a black dot alight.

Very slowly, the President turned back to the assembly, a frown on his face. Now there was complete silence. The members glanced uneasily from one to the other as a young man with jet black hair and a straight-hewn determined face pushed back his chair and climbed to his feet.

"Well?" The President's voice was flint hard.

"I think our security arrangements are inadequate, sir." The man didn't bat an eyelid as he spoke. "It's my opinion that

we should ask International Rescue to be present at the next launching."

The President's lips worked soundlessly for long moments. Everyone was conscious of the small pulse that began to throb in his temples.

"You... you *what*? Have you the impertinence, sir, to suggest that we are incapable of handling our own security arrangements?"

There was no humour in the smile that came to the young man's face. Gently, he rifled the report that lay in front of him.

"It's not a suggestion, sir. It's a fact. I have eight hundred and twenty-six pages right here to prove it."

Immediately, the assembly broke out into a hubbub of excited chatter. The President sat down heavily, and bit his tongue. There could be no argument... the young delegate was absolutely right.

With an effort, the leader of the committee composed himself. He picked up his hammer, and again it rapped the table for silence.

"Very well. We shall put it to the vote. There is no doubt whatever that the security arrangements of the International Rescue Organisation are the finest in the world, and therefore, I suppose that their advice and counsel would be well worth having. Gentlemen, may I ask you to indicate for or against?"

This time, there were twelve tangerine dots on the indicator.

"The resolution is carried unanimously," said the President soberly. "Now, would the honourable delegate please tell the assembly if he has any means in mind by which to contact International Rescue?"

The outspoken young man frowned slightly, and his voice took on a slightly guarded note. "It's... it's tricky, sir. As you know, the whereabouts of International Rescue are unknown. Perhaps if we sent out multi-wavelength calls..."

Another delegate, a solidly-built man wearing the sleeve badges of Chief Press Attache to the Martian Exploration Council stood up.

"Speaking as an old newspaper hand, sir, I think I could suggest an appropriate method of contact." The President nodded. "Carry on, Mortimer. We're listening."

The Press Attache cleared his throat. "Supposing that tomorrow's editions of the international papers carried a banner headline... something like 'International Rescue Please Help'. Then a subline... 'Second Launch of Zero X approved'. It's bound to arouse the Thunderbirds people's curiosity."

"Quite so, Mortimer." The President sounded a little impatient. "But what guarantee would we have that they'd contact us?"

"None, sir," smiled the press man. "But we'd follow it up with television coverage on the same theme... you know, 'International Rescue... we *need* you'... the heavy stuff. World-wide interest would be aroused, and in the end, I.R. would find public pressure forcing them to agree."

The young delegate chipped in again, eagerly. "Mortimer has a good point, gentlemen. After all, a direct call to

International Rescue, even if we knew how to make it, could possibly result in a flat refusal to assist."

The President looked round the table for the last time. "Very well. We will merely observe the formality of agreeing to Mortimer's method, and then he can leave immediately to organise things."

It wasn't often that the peace and quiet of the villa on Tracy Island was disturbed by internal argument.

An emergency rescue-call might plunge the headquarters into momentary anxiety, yes ... but raised voices between Jeff Tracy and his sons were an extreme rarity.

That was why Tin-Tin, helping to prepare the mid-day meal in the kitchen, felt oddly uncomfortable at the table-thumping and shouting coming from the lounge.

Jeff Tracy waved a newspaper in the air and brought it slapping down on his desk. The picture jumped out of the front page ... a long-shot of an island somewhere on a seascape horizon. Not Tracy Island, just an anonymous atoll. But the headline above it... "INTERNATIONAL RESCUE... COULD THEY OPERATE FROM AN ISLAND?"

"This is getting ludicrous, I tell you!" Jeff clasped his hands behind him and paced the carpet. "Could they operate from an island!" He rounded on Scott, standing tight-lipped and silent by the door.

"Any newspaperman in the world would give his right arm to know our whereabouts. Don't you boys understand that we just can't take the risk of exposing ourselves by coming forward to help with this Zero X project?"

Scott shook his head impatiently. "But, father, this is one of the most exciting ventures ever!"

"Gee, Dad, I'd give anything to be there!" Now it was Alan again, repeating the very words he'd used two years before.

Then Gordon: "Me, too. This is the highlight of the twenty-first century!"

Jeff Tracy took a grip on his rising temper. "Look. Are we in this business for kicks, or for the lives we can save?"

He looked round his sons in turn, daring them to argue. Virgil shifted his feet uneasily and muttered: "Maybe this could save lives, Dad."

"Maybe!" Jeff exploded again. "Maybe is the operative word! Maybe they'll need our help to save lives, and when they do we'll be there. But until then we stay right here, and that's *final!*"

Jeff stamped out of the lounge and left the boys to disperse. But Scott stayed where he was, and switched on the television set.

He sat there for possibly forty minutes, watching the screen moodily. Absorbing nothing. And then, suddenly, it was time for the news coverage, and Scott sat bolt upright as the words 'International Rescue' flashed across the screen.

He was aware that his father had come back into the room. A couple of others, too. Possibly Virgil and Gordon... but all his attention was on the announcer whose serious face now filled the screen.

"International Rescue, we need your help. That was the headline in yesterday's papers." The announcer paused. "So

far, there has been no response, and now a new appeal goes out from this station and all allied networks throughout the world. International Rescue, we know you are watching us. If you transmit a picture on 118 megacycles we will relay this picture, together with coverage on our own interviewer, which will enable you to put your case to the public first hand."

Jeff snorted. "Put our case. Heck, it sounds as though we're on trial for something."

"We are frankly puzzled," went on the commentator, "that with your fine record you now refuse to help in this great project. We are sure your reasons are good ones... but we'd just like to hear them."

Scott leaned forward and switched off the set. He turned to his father, and Jeff saw the same determination he felt himself reflected in his son's face. "What do you say, father? What can we lose?"

Jeff sighed deeply. "Now listen. I'm gonna say this once more. The answer is *no!*"

Nobody in the lounge moved. Jeff felt eyes boring into him from all sides. Slowly, he turned on his heel and walked to the door... and then he turned to face his sons.

He shrugged his shoulders, sighed, and said: "Okay, okay. What was that frequency again?"

The lounge blazed with lights. The heat from them was already stifling.

Jeff Tracy, looking decidedly uncomfortable, allowed Tin-Tin to make the final adjustments to his television makeup.

"Please keep still, Mr. Tracy. How can I make you look beautiful?"

Jeff scoffed. "Firstly, I can't ever remember wanting to look beautiful, Tin-Tin. Secondly, I'm not going to be seen."

"Th-that's right, Mr. Tracy." Brains was super-serious as usual. He leaned forward from his position on the TV camera dolly and waved for Alan to move the floodlights behind Jeff. "With plenty b-back lighting, we'll—er—be sure that your picture is a m-mere silhouette."

"More cable here, Gordon!" Scott was hauling in the microphones by brute force. "Where's Virgil?" "At the t-transmitter," said Brains testily. "You d-don't think the picture's going to go over the airwaves of its own accord?"

Unused to television procedure, the Tracys found themselves up to their ears in problems... but far across the Pacific Ocean, the coastal network headquarters of the Trans-American Television Company were also having their nervous problems.

In the telecast control room, a producer sat chewing his fingernails beside his continuity girl and his vision mixer. Neither girl wanted to speak for fear of having her ears chewed off by her tense boss.

"Thirty seconds to start of programme, sir," faltered the vision mixer.

"Thirty seconds!" The producer mopped his brow for the hundredth time. "How can I think straight when I'm going through forty kinds of torment? This is the first goldarned show I've ever put on without knowing whether the star's gonna turn up or not!"

“Ten seconds,” said the mixer nervously. “Nine, eight, seven...

Something like a groan came from the producer. “... four, three, two, one...

In the studio, the interviewer looked up at the warning light and licked his lips. Then the bark of producer crackled over his speaker. “Zero! Camera six! ”

The red light went on, and the interviewer, his nerves like jelly, forced a picture-frame smile and began.

“This is the Trans-American TV Network bringing you the ‘Face of the World’. This week we have challenged International Rescue, whose organisation remains a closely-guarded secret, to send us a television picture via their space satellite, so that we, on behalf of you, the public, can interview them regarding the second launch of Zero X, next week.”

The announcer never wavered as a concealed light by his hand began to flash.

“And now, the moment has arrived,” he said gayly... too gayly. “In a few seconds we will know whether they have accepted our challenge. Come in, International Rescue.”

“Cut to camera five!” yelled the producer. His crossed fingers were acutely painful.

Silence. Nothing.

“Er... International Rescue... are you there... ?” The announcer sounded as though he was calling in a cat.

And then, even as the producer began to bury his face in his hands, the camera five monitor flickered into life, and the silhouette head of Jeff Tracy appeared on the screen.

“Good evening. I am a representative of International Rescue, and I would like to thank the Trans-American TV Network for the opportunity of putting our case to the public.”

Perspiring freely, the interviewer beamed out at his viewers.

“And thank *you*, International Rescue, for turning up as usual . . . , er, bang on schedule. The burning question we have to put to you tonight is, why have you refused to be present at the next launch of Zero X?”

Jeff’s voice was perfectly even as he replied. “International Rescue was formed with the sole object of saving human lives when all conventional methods had failed. As far as the Zero X project is concerned, no one needs rescuing and its own rescue apparatus seems to be adequate for any emergency.”

“This sir, we understand and, of course, we respect your point of view.” The interviewer sounded sure of his ground. “But the Zero X project is away ahead of its time and is to a degree an experimental operation. Surely your chances of saving the crew and indeed the craft if anything goes wrong, would be heightened if your machines were actually in attendance at the time of the launch.”

Jeff had to think for a moment before he answered that one. These boys were persuasive.

“That’s true, but you must understand there will be only five people aboard Zero X, and we provide a service for the whole world. We have to decide how best to deploy our

facilities in order that maximum benefit is obtained. Anyway, the Zero X project has been proved to be mechanically sound. The last crash was caused by sabotage."

The interviewer nodded in agreement. "Certainly. But supposing the saboteur should strike again... ?"

And at that moment, far across the world, somewhere in the East, The Hood clenched his fists as he watched the relayed TV telecast.

"The saboteur *will* strike again," he hissed. "He *will!* "

The arch-criminal mastermind whirled from the television set and whipped aside glass beaded curtains that concealed a lifelike bronze statue. The statue seemed to glow with a deep red light as The Hood's eyes, now wide and menacing, bored into it. It was as though the bronze had taken on some form of unreal life, and was possessed with the power to speak. A tortured cry came from the metal lips of the statue that was a perfect portrait of Kyrano, Jeff Tracy's faithful manservant!

"Kyrano! My half-brother!" The Hood's voice was shrill and powerful. "You are in my power! You can reveal to me all the information I require! No matter where you are, you cannot escape me!" In his quarters on Tracy Island, Kyrano had felt the dizzy spell coming on. It happened infrequently, but when it did, he knew he was going to collapse insensible ... to lie unconscious for minutes, and then revive ... to have no recollection of anything that had happened. Now he reeled sideways, and clutched at his wardrobe to support himself. His voice whimpered... "No... no!"

Then he fell, and his blank mind was filled with the voice of The Hood—as though the man had been in the same room

with him.

"Kyrano, the secrets of Zero X will make me a powerful man... but should International Rescue become involved it will make my task more difficult. You will help me, do you hear? You will report all movements of International Rescue!" Groans of fear came from the fallen man as he rolled about the floor of his room. "No... no..."

"Do not refuse, Kyrano!" The voice rose to a screaming crescendo. "You are under my power. Your subconscious mind belongs entirely to me! "

Meanwhile, in the lounge, Jeff Tracy's television ordeal was drawing to a close. "I still maintain," he said in answer to the interviewer's latest barrage of questions, "that we are an organisation that concentrates on rescuing people when they are in danger. We are the 'cure'... not the prevention." He paused, and perhaps there was less aggression in his voice than before. "But I can promise you that we will give this matter our serious consideration, and I would like to thank you for your courtesy and responsible attitude throughout this interview. In conclusion, I must tell you that these pictures have been relayed to you via our space satellite and as a result the satellite will immediately move its position into a new orbit to ensure that our secrecy is maintained."

"Certainly, sir." The interviewer was polite, but he knew, and the producer knew, that there was one big gun still to be fired. "Before we do actually conclude though, I would like to read you a message, received by our studio a few moments ago, direct from The World President. I quote..."

" 'The work of International Rescue is universally recognised and I understand and respect the view that you have just

expressed. Nevertheless, the Zero Project is of paramount importance to mankind. The benefits that may materialise as the result of a successful mission to Mars may provide untold rewards to the world at large. I therefore make a personal request that you should place your great organisation at our disposal for the launch of Zero X. Signed..."

The interviewer looked up. "...The President of the Governing Council of The World'."

Nobody had mentioned the TV interview to Jeff Tracy in the twenty-four hours that followed. His sons had kept out of his way as much as possible, and Jeff himself had spent hours at a time just sitting at his desk, staring vacantly into space.

Alan Tracy buttonholed Scott out in the patio, beside the swimming pool. "Have you seen the morning press?" he whispered.

"No," said Scott. "Why are you whispering?"

Alan looked foolish. "Aw, it's the headlines... read 'em. Dad's going to sound off again, if I'm not mistaken."

Scott took the paper from his brother. "THE WORLD WAITS, AFTER PRESIDENT'S TV APPEAL." The words jumped out at him, and he shook his head, "You know that expression, 'no man is an island'? It means a guy can't shut himself entirely away from world opinion. The influences of others have to affect him in the end."

Alan nodded. "You think Dad's going to find that out?"

"I do," said Scott. Then he grinned. "You might even say that there's gonna be a special saying coined that'll apply

personally to him ... 'no man is an island, even though he lives on one'! C'mon, let's go on in and see what happens."

The boys found Jeff Tracy lying full stretch on the settee. He could have been asleep, his head pillowed on his folded arms, except that his eyes were wide open.

"Seen this, Dad!"

They watched as he read, and shot quick glances at each other as Jeff slowly set the newspaper aside.

"Take-off is scheduled for tomorrow morning, father," said Alan tentatively.

"You'll have to make your decision soon, Dad." Now Virgil and Gordon had joined them. "Even if it's 'no'."

Jeff shook his head slowly. "This is a tough one. I know how you all feel. I guess you're rarin' to go, but as you know we have a strict rule here ... no International Rescue craft is touched unless someone's in grave danger. Right?"

He looked up for confirmation, and the boys all nodded their heads.

"Right."

"Right, father."

"Guess so."

"That's the way it's always been."

Jeff strode to the window and placed his hands on the sill. He put his weight on them and flexed himself on his toes. The tension of silence built up in the lounge until it was almost unbearable.

Then, suddenly, he turned.

“Rules, as you know, were made to be broken, boys.”

“You mean... ?” Scott’s face was slackly incredulous.

“Yep. I’ve changed my mind. Scott, take Thunderbird 1, proceed to Glenn Field and stand by there for launch of Zero X! ”

“F.A.B! I’m on my way!”

“Virgil. Launch Thunderbird 2 and follow Scott to Glenn Field. When Zero X takes off, escort it through the atmosphere on the first part of its journey.”

“Yes, *sir!*”

Alan was jiggling about from foot to foot in excitement.  
“Father, can I...?”

“Yes, you can,” grinned Jeff. “Launch Thunderbird 3 and orbit the earth until Zero X has established its course to Mars.”

“Gee, thanks, Dad! You’re a king!”

Scott was already at the rotating wall-bay that served as the concealed launch-entry to Thunderbird 1, Virgil was stretched up against the swivelling full-length rocket painting that served a similar role for Thunderbird 2.

On the lift-couch that would take him to Thunderbird 3, Alan glanced across at the fourth brother, Gordon. He stood there alone beside his father, his face a mask of disappointment.

“And me, father...?”

Jeff frowned. "It's unlikely you'll be needed, but you'd better be ready, just in case."

"Okay, Dad." Gordon tried not to let his feelings show.

Jeff walked to his desk and sat down. He placed his fists squarely before him and looked around at the three of his sons who were eager at their launch stations.

"Good trip, boys." He raised his right hand. "*Thunderbirds are go!*"

# CHAPTER THREE

THE OUTCROP OF TRACY ISLAND was as innocent and peaceful-looking as usual. A rocky atoll rising sheer from the sea with only the sparkle of the solitary villa to show that anyone lived there at all.

But beneath the surface, deep within the rocks the villa, the familiar routine of Thunderbird launch was in progress—the amazing mechanism that was the brainchild of International Rescue's genius scientist.

The moving walkway had carried Scott Tracy to the entry port of Thunderbird 1, and now he was seated at the controls in his uniform of I.R. Blue, while the rocket beneath him moved on its cradle towards the pad that lay concealed beneath the villa swimming pool. The travelling gantry stopped, and automatically, the whole water compartment of the pool slid aside into a recess, to reveal the shining nose of Scott's craft.

"Thunderbird 1 in launch position, father." Scott spoke into the intercom.

"Okay, Scott. Clear to go... and good luck."

A blast of white smoke and flame belched from the tail of the rocket, and then it was gone—a blur against the sky.

The mobile couch that took Alan Tracy below the level of the headquarters lounge descended on its steel shaft until it was at ground level in the loading bay of Thunderbird 3. Dwarfed by the immense space ship, it slid on to the conveyor that took it to a point directly at the centre of the triangle formed by the three tail motors.

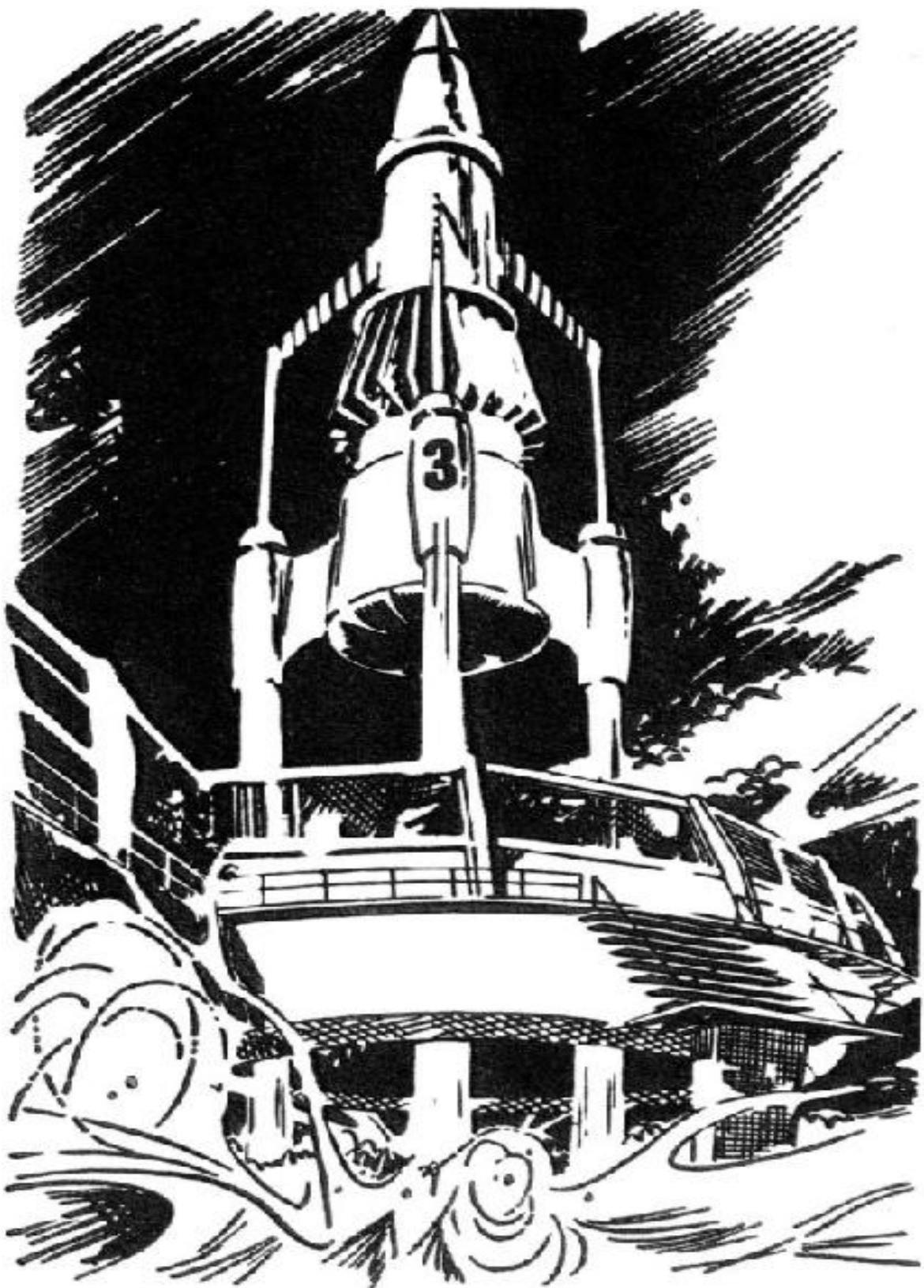
Then elevators carried the young astronaut up to the launch centre of Thunderbird 3, and Alan was at the controls in moments.

‘Thunderbird 3 ready for blast off, father.’

“Okay, Alan. Clear to go.”

The ground shuddered as the red pencil of the giant craft’s fuselage appeared through the circular centre of the roundhouse. Then a momentary blast of flames and smoke, and another International Rescue ship was sky-borne.

Only Virgil left. In the undercliff hangar that housed Thunderbird 2, he depressed the lever that lifted the squat freighter on its telescopic legs. Then he watched as the line of pods—main bodies that each carried specific equipment for various operations, passed beneath Thunderbird 2. “Selecting general purpose pod, father,” he intoned, and cut the lever so that the main body of his ship sank over the pod.



*... a momentary blast of flames and smoke, and another International Rescue ship was sky-borne.*

Then the cliff-face in front of him opened outwards, and the big vehicle trundled out on to its launch ramp, the row of Brain's specially hinged camouflage 'palm trees' falling back to let it through.

A metallic click as Thunderbird 2 reached the end of its ramp, and then the machinery whirring as it pushed up from the ground to angle the craft at forty-five degrees into the sky.

"Thunderbird 2 standing by, father."

"F.A.B. Virgil. Clear to go."

The powerful thrust-jets in the tail fired blasting flame into the exhaust trench, and Virgil was off in the wake of his brothers. Immediately, he switched to plan-mutual radio contact, four-way communication.

On the balcony of the villa, Gordon Tracy watched him go, and stood there long after the sound of the rocket motors had faded into the distance. He heaved a long, depressed sigh.

In the lounge, Jeff Tracy looked up suddenly. He realised that Tin-Tin had been speaking to him.

"Uh... I'm sorry, Tin-Tin. I was lost in a kind of dream."

"I understand, Mr. Tracy. You came to your decision, then."

Jeff smiled slowly. "I only hope it was the right one, Tin-Tin. Is everything okay? You look a little worried."

The girl shrugged. "I'm all right. It's just father. He's had another one of his dizzy spells, but he's a little better now."

"I'm glad to hear of that," said Jeff. "You take care of Kyrano. I don't know what we'd do without him."

Tin-Tin changed the subject. "Well, I suppose now the boys are going to be at the launching of Zero X, the safety of the crew is assured. But what about the saboteurs? Do you think they will strike again?"

"Hmm." Jeff pondered for a second. "Say, what's the time, Tin-Tin?"

"The time?" She looked surprised. "Why, it's just about eleven o'clock, Mr. Tracy."

"Good. That makes it about 4 p.m. in England. Tea-time."

Tin-Tin's slanted eyes widened. She was utterly mystified. "Tea-time. Yes, of course . . . but I don't understand..."

Jeff grinned broadly. He knew he was teasing her. "Well, about those saboteurs you were mentioning. If they do strike again. I know just the person to stop them!"

Four very discreet chimes tinkled from the gilt ormolu clock on the mantelpiece in the high drawing room. There was a sedate, luxurious atmosphere about the rich hangings and antique regency furniture.

Lady Penelope Creighton-Ward, taking things extremely easy in her stately English county home, reached out and grasped a long bell sash.

Almost immediately, the double doors swung gracefully open, and Parker strode haughtily across the deep, soundless carpet.

"You rang, m'lady?"

“Yes, Parker. It’s time for my tea.”

The perfect butler, who was also Lady Penelope’s chauffeur, had been long enough in his job to know what four o’clock meant. The silver salver with the Georgian tea-service on it was already waiting, discreetly out of sight, in the hall.

With just enough of a pause to make it look as though he’d been to the kitchens to fetch it, Parker brought it in and poured a cup for Lady Penelope. “Will that be all, m’lady?”

“Thank you, Parker. You may go.”

Soundlessly, the doors closed behind him.

And then, as Penelope sat back, the familiar bleep-bleep coming from the lid of her tea-pot made her pause.

“Ah. I’m wanted,” she said to herself, and stretched out to twist the ebony finger-knob at the top of the lid.

Instantly, Jeff’s voice came thinly into the room. “Penny? Are you there?”

“Hello, Jeff. This is Lady Penelope speaking.” “Great, Penny. I’ve made my decision, and we’re going to oversee this Zero X launch. Thunderbirds 1, 2 and 3 are on their way. I want you to come to the States immediately, and ensure there’s no repeat of the sabotage attempt.”

Lady Penelope smiled. “F.A.B. Jeff. I’ll fly over with the car right away. I’ll need to move around there freely on this type of assignment. Can you pull a few strings your end to see that I get the passes and so on that I’ll require?”

“There’s a big press conference lined up, Penny. I’ll fix it so you’re representing a British magazine.” “Fine, Jeff. Over and

out."

Once again, Lady Penelope reached for the bell to summon Parker.

"I rang, Parker," she said quickly to forestall the inevitable question, "because I want you to get out the Rolls Royce. I will call the airport. We're taking off for America with FAB 1 immediately."

Within the hour, the pink Rolls with its distinctive numberplate was loaded aboard the first available Fireflash to New York, and Lady Penelope and Parker made their way to the first class passenger lounge to await take-off.

"Is everything all right, Parker?" Lady Penelope looked concerned, for Parker was fidgeting uncomfortably in his easy chair.

"Oh, yes, m'lady, er... quite all right. But I do wish you 'ad allowed me to travel tourist class. Some'ow it don't seem quite right, m'lady... er, travelling... er, first class like this, with you, m'lady."

"Why ever not, Parker? Would you like me to transfer you? It can be arranged, you know." Hastily, Parker shook his head. "Oh no, m'lady... er... I'm not one to complain, that's quite all right. I'll make the best of it now."

Lady Penelope fought back a smile. "Thank you, Parker. That's very accommodating of you."

"Quite alright, m'lady. Anything to oblige." Turning aside for a moment, Lady Penelope took a powder compact from her bag and opened it. Then, holding it close to her face, she pressed her finger hard against the catch and spoke in a low voice.

"International Rescue. This is Lady Penelope speaking."

Instantly, Jeff's face appeared on the ground glass screen that took the place of the compact's mirror. "Hello, Penny."

"I'm aboard a Fireflash aircraft, heading for New York. Estimated time of arrival, sixteen hundred hours your time, so I should arrive at Glenn Field about eighteen hundred hours."

"F.A.B., Penny." Jeff Tracy sounded pleased. "Anything else?"

"Just one thing," said Lady Penelope. "You'd better warn the boys not to reveal that they know me, Jeff."

Jeff Tracy closed the communications circuit with Lady Penelope and turned to the main microphone on his desk. It was built into the base of an innocent-looking ashtray that tipped forward at the touch of a hidden button.

"Thunderbirds 1, 2, and 3. This is International Rescue. Come in, boys."

Scott, Virgil and Alan answered immediately. "Now hear this. The situation at present is that Thunderbird 1 has just landed at Glenn Field. Right, Scott?"

"Right, father."

"Thunderbird 2 will be arriving in fifteen minutes from now. Thunderbird 3 is safely in earth's orbit, and our London agent, Lady Penelope, is approaching America in a Fireflash. When she arrives at Glenn Field, on no account show any sign of recognition. It could jeopardise the whole operation. The launch of Zero X is now scheduled for fourteen hundred hours tomorrow, and Lady Penelope will be checking out the crew at this evening's press conference."

“F.A.B., father.” The three voices came together.

Scott stayed on the air longer than the others. He said: “Just for the record, father, I’m setting up the International Rescue control console in the main control tower, right beside the Controller of the Zero X.”

“Okay, Scott. Don’t tread on anyone’s toes. Over and out.”

The Central Controller at Scott’s side made a point of keeping his interest off the International Rescue equipment. Like most of the senior officials the Tracy brothers came in contact with, this man had a sense of his responsibilities. “These guys have plenty good reasons for keeping their operations secret. They’ve got to be respected.”

Scott depressed one of the buttons on his console. “Thunderbird 2, from mobile control. You are clear to land.”

“F.A.B, Scott.”

From the big windows of the control tower, Scott glanced out. There was Thunderbird 1 parked on the tarmac, and now the big green bulk of her sister ship was coming slowly down on thundering retro-jets. Already, a complete cordon of police cars surrounded the space allocated to the two ships.

Scott turned back and flicked off all the switches on his console. “Well, that’s that. By tomorrow morning, Thunderbird 3 will be in the correct orbital position to keep an eye on the launch path, and we’ve got all our gear here.”

“Okay. I guess we can clear out of here and post the guards.” The Central Controller stood up and rubbed his hands. “I don’t suppose we’ll be seeing you at the press conference tonight?”

The young pilot of Thunderbird 1 grinned. "No thanks! As far as we're concerned, the only good publicity is no publicity! "

The two men left the room, and the Controller dialled the time-switch lock that could only be opened again at the pre-determined hour ... the moment of countdown commencement the following day. An armed police corporal gave them a salute as they strolled off down the corridor....

The room for the press conference was itself a model of security. On the main floor were four rows of small tables, each with a single seat and a telephone. At each table sat a press representative from one of the great international newspapers and publicity combines.

At the head of the room, seated on a rostrum behind a glass screen, was a man already well known to the reporters and correspondents. This was the Zero X public relations officer.

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen, its time to begin. Have a good conference, but please be brief. Remember—our astronauts, as I'm sure you are all aware, have a kind of busy schedule tomorrow!"

A small ripple of laughter ran round the room, and then Captain Paul Travers walked out of a door at the back of the rostrum and sat down by the P.R.O. In front of the Captain was another telephone, and above his head, the number 23 flashed up on a screen.

Each reporter already knew the priority of precedence, and the first hand to move for a telephone down on the interview floor was slender, and elegantly feminine. Lady Penelope Creighton-Ward carefully dialled the number 23, and was in immediate contact with Captain Travers.

“Good evening, Captain,” she said. “I am Lady Penelope, representing the Universal Mirror. First question. Tell me what you find most frightening ... the ordeal of this press conference, or your flight tomorrow in Zero X?”

Paul Travers grinned amiably. “Without question, the press conference, ma’am.”

Lady Penelope followed up with half-a-dozen standard questions, and then looked up to smile directly at the Captain.

“I’m taking the liberty, Captain Travers, of sending a messenger across with a small Saint Christopher medal specially struck for the occasion by the Universal Mirror. I would like to tell my readers that you will be wearing it during the flight.”

“It’ll be a pleasure, Lady Penelope.”

“That’s very kind of you, Captain Travers. And now my time is up, so I’ll just wish you the best of luck for tomorrow.”

As the interviews continued, a small package arrived at the side of Paul Travers’s desk. A messenger whispered in his ear: “From Lady Penelope, Universal Mirror, sir.”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.” Captain Travers deftly unwrapped the little box with one hand and drew out the glittering circle of the Saint Christopher medallion. Still answering questions from someone on the floor, he reached up and pinned it to his lapel.

But then, as he glanced across to nod his thanks to Lady Penelope, he saw she was frowning and waving her hand as though to say: “No, that’s wrong.”

“Under the lapel?” he mouthed, and she nodded. Smiling, he unpinned it and replaced it out of sight.

Then, and only then, Lady Penelope pushed back her chair and left the conference room. There was a smile of deep satisfaction on her lips.

“Now for the rest of the crew and the two scientists,” she said to herself.

An hour later, Lady Penelope was sitting in the back of the pink Rolls Royce, FAB 1. In front of her, a monitor screen began to illuminate as she touched a concealed button, and within a couple of seconds there was a picture of Jeff Tracy on it.

“Hello, Penny. What’s the latest news?”

“Are you asking me in my capacity as a reporter, or an agent?” But then Penelope smiled apologetically, and was immediately serious.

“I’ve been in touch with the security boys, Jeff, and they’ll be giving the ground crew a final checking in the morning. In the meantime, I’ve succeeded in giving the crew and passengers one of the Saint Christopher medals each.”

“Good, Penny. So far so good. Remember, it’s not only the Zero X project that’s at stake... International Rescue’s reputation’s being put to the test as well.”

“Don’t worry, Jeff.” Few people could sound as confident as Lady Penelope, and really feel it. “We’ll see that nothing goes wrong.”

Jeff looked warmly at her. “F.A.B. Goodnight, Penny. Sweet dreams.”

The monitor darkened, and now Parker's voice broke the ensuing silence.

"To the 'otel, m'lady?"

"To the hotel, Parker. We need our beauty sleep, because I have a feeling that tomorrow will be fraught with danger!"

The fine weather held all night, and next morning stayed clear and sunny. There was no trace of cloud ceiling by lunch time.

The Central Controller glanced briefly round at Scott before he flicked the all-stations transmission switch on the main control panel.

"Sixty minutes to lift-off. Commence Zero X pre-flight assembly."

Now Scott spoke quickly into his own microphone.

"Thunderbird 2 from Mobile Control. Are you ready, Virgil?"

"Standing by, Scott."

The flick of another switch, and Scott glanced up at the empty sky as he spoke again.

"Mobile Control calling Thunderbird 3. Come in, Alan."

The International Rescue astronaut's voice came faintly into the room, thin and sharp against the tinny background of atmospherics.

"Okay, Scott. Orbit's going fine, and dead to schedule. I should be able to see Zero X as it leaves the earth's atmosphere, unless lift-off time is altered."

“Countdown here is proceeding normally,” replied Scott, glancing for confirmation at the Controller. “Stand by an open wavelength, and I’ll give you spot checks every ten minutes.”

Scott flicked off the switch and sat back. His eyes wandered over to the far perimeter of Glenn Field, where he could see the diamond sparkle of the sun against vehicle windscreens in the visitors’ carpark....

“I wonder what Penny’s doing over there,” he thought to himself.

In fact, Lady Penelope Creighton-Ward was just about to begin the main part of her security check. Parker turned towards her from the front seat, his eyebrows raised questioningly.

“Now, m’lady?”

Lady Penelope nodded. “Now, Parker.”

The chauffeur tripped a control on the dashboard, and the silver mascot on top of the Rolls Royce’s bonnet revolved a few degrees to the left.

“Channel One, m’lady,” said Parker.

Instantly, there came a soft, insistent bleeping as Lady Penelope dabbed a finger at the button on the rear seat console marked “Channel One.”

“Good, that’s all right, Parker.”

Again the mascot spun on its axis. “Channel Two, m’lady.”

Another button. And again the comforting bleeping.

“Selecting Channel Three, m’lady.”

“Perfect. We’re doing very nicely.” There was the bleeping again, and it repeated for Channel Four. But then, as Parker set the mascot for Channel Five, Lady Penelope’s voice took on a hard edge.

“Trouble, Parker. There’s no signal coming through!”

Parker sighed regretfully. “I thought it was too good to be true, m’lady.”

Instantly, Penelope made contact with Scott in Mobile Control.

“Emergency, Scott. Repeat. Emergency! Number five is negative! ”

Scott’s voice... filled with anxiety. “Okay, Penelope. Here’s what we do. Whatever happens the countdown must continue, otherwise we miss the rendezvous with Thunderbird 3 in space. I’ll attend to Number 5 personally. Meanwhile, you’d better locate Doctor Grant.”

As the Central Controller kept up his pre-launch commentary, Scott left the room and made for the passenger launch compartment. The two scientists, Doctors Grant and Pierce, were sitting there, preparing to strap themselves into their couches, and everything looked exactly as it should.

“Okay, gentlemen?” Scott sounded at ease and amiable.

“Yeah, fine.” But Doctor Pierce sounded vaguely uneasy. Grant didn’t answer at all, but kept staring straight in front of him as Scott walked across.

“How about you, Doctor Grant?” There was something insistent in Scott’s voice that made the second scientist clench his knuckles.

Then, suddenly, Scott shot his hand out and clasped Grant by the chin. Immediately, the brilliantly formed rubber mask ripped aside, to reveal the snarling features of The Hood!

“Look out, young man! He’s got a gun!” Doctor Pierce’s warning came just that instant too late... and Scott felt the hard muzzle ram into his ribs. “Back, curse you! I won’t hesitate to shoot!” Warily, Scott obeyed, watching cat-like for his chance... but the squat, ugly silencer at the end of the gun-barrel followed him unwaveringly as The Hood backed towards the door.

“Throw down the gun. Give yourself up.” Scott sounded calmer than he felt. “Whoever you are, your little sabotage game’s over now. You’ll never get away from here.”

“That’s where you’re mistaken, little man!” The Hood spat the words out insolently. “Alright, so you’ve scotched my plan this time... but I’ll win in the end. And when I do, I’ll remember just another score to settle with International Rescue.”

The Hood was at the door as Scott made his desperate play. Hurling himself to one side, he dived full length for the edge of the sliding door and hooked his fingers round it even as the deadly wasp of a slug sang past his ear. The door whipped inwards and cannoned into The Hood’s shoulder, sending him sprawling. The gun scattered across the floor out of reach.

Scott barrel-rolled and leaped to his feet, even as the heavy body came roaring across the room to slam him back against the wall.

Now Doctor Pierce was behind The Hood, his hands tearing at the mastermind's shoulders. But the arch-criminal's elbow came slamming back to the scientist's solar plexus, and he reeled away, gasping.

Scott's right fist came up from somewhere in the region of his knees and smashed sickly against The Hood's jaw. The man shook his head as though the blow had been no more than a fly-swat. The strength in him was immense... incredible.

His boot ground down on Scott's instep, and the Thunderbird Pilot grimaced in agony. Then coupled fists slammed down on the side of his unprotected neck, and The Hood was away! Through a red mist of pain, Scott saw him snatch up his gun and dive through the door, and by the time he staggered to wrench it open again. The Hood had vanished.

Pierce sat on his couch, his hands clasped to his middle, his face ashen. But he waved Scott aside as the young man stumbled over to him. "I'm... I'm okay. Get after him..."

"Don't worry." The words came rasping from Scott's throat. "He'll... he'll be taken care of, be back with you soon. And you... are you okay to continue the project ..."

Doctor Pierce managed to nod, and Scott felt a wave of relief surge over him. In the last few seconds, everything had been in the balance.

Scott rubbed his aching neck and shook the last muzzy cobwebs from his brain. Then he lurched up the corridor to Central Control, and flopped into the seat behind Mobile Control.

“Penny. Are you there? Come in. Lady Penelope.” The voice of the agent answered him loud and clear. “I’ve located Doctor Grant, Scott. He’s at a bearing of 174 and a range of 1,204 yards from my present position.”

“F.A.B., Penny. You can leave me to fix him. Number Five was a phoney alright, but he’s got away. You’d better see what you can do to stop him!”

“Leave it to me, Scott. Just give me a quick description.”

Minutes later, Scott was relaying the bearings Lady Penelope had given him to the Spaceport police, and a squad car was tearing across the tarmac towards Missile Store F.

“He’s in there for sure, but we don’t know his condition.” Scott’s voice stabbed over the radio in the police vehicle. “Provided he’s okay, bring him to Central Control immediately.”

“Roger, Control.” The police driver sounded surprised. “But how did you know all this?”

“Let’s say a pretty little bird told me,” replied Scott, allowing himself a smile. “Now listen . . . , don’t make too much out of this. It’s better if the whole incident’s glossed over to avoid worrying the Zero X crew.”

The General Alarm system had already been triggered, but now the Central Controller shut it down and made a loudspeaker correction over the entire spaceport system. “Alarm sounded in error. Countdown to continue as normal.”

The police had found Doctor Grant tied up, but unharmed. Now he stood in Central Control facing Scott and the Controller, none the worse for his ordeal.

"There was no violence," he admitted. "This guy just held me up at gunpoint and locked me away. Guess it was just another sabotage attempt. But what beats me is how you found me so quickly." "All you need to know right now is that everything's okay and proceeding as per schedule," said Scott. "You'd better join your friend Doctor Pierce in the passenger launch compartment right away." "Okay," nodded Doctor Grant. "But I think I'll get rid of this." He pulled back his lapel and unclipped a silver Saint Christopher medallion. "Some newspaper dame gave me it to bring luck. Fat lot of good it turned out to be!"

He tossed the brooch to Scott, but it slipped through his fingers and fell behind the Mobile Control console. There, it shattered... and spilled micro radio parts on the floor. Hastily, Scott scuffed them out of sight with his shoe. After all, there wasn't time to start explaining that the brooch was a homer, tuned to a frequency that operated the bleep-bleep device on the main monitor in FAB 1.

# CHAPTER FOUR

THE ENGINE of FAB 1 was ticking over almost silently in the visitors' car park at Glenn Field. Parker sat ready at the controls, while Lady Penelope craned forward from the rear seat, her eyes on the distant tower of Central Control.

"That car, Parker! Check the driver!" A small saloon had just appeared from the rear of the Control Tower, moving fast.

Parker spun the dials of the tele-scanner before him, and the speeding car zoomed up into close perspective, the domed head of The Hood clearly identifiable behind the wheel.

"That's 'im, m'lady! "

"Right, Parker! After him!" FAB 1 shot forward and left the car park on screaming tyres. Beyond, the black saloon came round in a tight turn and went like a bat out of hell for the main spaceport gates.

Guards on the machine-gun security towers at each side of the gate saw it coming, and instantly, a striped wooden barrier dropped into position across the entrance.

The car never faltered. In a shower of splintering debris, it hurtled through, bullets kicking up the ground behind it.

And then FAB 1, scattering the fallen wood, making the gate-keeper sprint for safety and drawing another burst of machine-gun fire from the tower.

"Hit the chauffeur an' win a prize," muttered Parker, ignoring the sudden blare of alarm sirens behind him.

Lady Penelope leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder, calm and unruffled as ever. "The road ahead twists and turns all over the place, Parker. He's got a smaller, more manoeuvrable car, and he's going to get the lead on us."

"Leave it to me, m'lady," smiled Parker grimly. "He may pull out of sight, but he won't be out of mind."

Parker triggered a switch on the dashboard, and a tiny homing dart streaked from the bonnet of FAB 1 to penetrate the boot of the quarry's car. "He can drive to Timbuctoo and we'll still pick up his signal now, m'lady. I'd 'ave used the machine gun on him, but fuss an' bother so near to the spaceport would only serve to make everyone jittery."

"Quite so, Parker. Excellent thinking. We don't want anyone to get nervous and stop the countdown. Not at this stage."

The chase flew for twenty miles across low-lying farmland and foothills. Now Penelope would see The Hood, far ahead, now he'd be lost. Then the road began to get steeper, running into mountainous country.

"The Seaboard Range," smiled Lady Penelope. "It looks as though our friend is heading for the coast, Parker."

"Yes, m'lady. You'd better 'ang on to your 'at, if you'll pardon me saying so."

FAB 1 shot along crazily tortuous precipice roads, the wheels sometimes skidding on the very brink of disaster, small stones and rocks dislodged to fall hundreds of feet into misty gorges. With a skill that a rally driver would envy, Parker wrestled the vehicle through the treacherous terrain as though he'd been used to conditions like this every day of his life.

"It never fails to amaze me, Parker," said Lady Penelope casually, "just how confident you are. Sometimes I think you were born behind the wheel of a car."

Parker did an expert speed-slide round a dizzy, open-sided bend and looked angelic. "When you— um—rescued me from my life of 'orrible, nasty crime, m'lady, I was a safebreaker." He paused for a moment, and added: "the best in the country, though I says it meself. But before that, I did a stretch ... I mean, a turn as a 'fast boy'."

"A *what*?" Lady Penelope looked amusedly at her chauffeur's greying hair. The term 'boy' seemed ludicrously out of place.

"A runner, m'lady." Parker sounded vaguely hurt. "You know. When a couple of blokes 'eave a brick through a jeweller's window and dive into a car for a quick getaway. I'd be the driver, see? And believe me, m'lady, once you learn to whip through London traffic at ninety and upwards, you can drive anywhere."

"You must have had quite a hectic past, Parker," said Lady Penelope.

"Ho yes, m'lady. But that's all over now. I'd never go back to it, because bein' a chauffeur to the landed gentry's such a nice, cushy, peaceful job."

FAB 1 slewed wildly round a corner, stood on two wheels, and for a desperate instant overhung a sheer drop. Far below, high-flying birds wheeled among drifting mist-clouds, and the ground was out of sight.

Now they were over the crest of the coastal range, and far away ahead, they could see the black saloon threading its way down the hairpin road.

"At full depression, I might be able to hit 'im with the cannon, m'lady," mentioned Parker.

"Very well. It's worth a try."

Parker braked the car to a halt and pulled the lever that slid a wicked-looking barrel between the bars of the radiator. It dropped down to a steep angle of forty-five degrees, and Parker watched the sights in the screen by his right hand.

His thumb hit the firing button as the dot of The Hood's car flashed into the cross-markers, but the red blossom of the striking shell was a good fifty yards short of the target.

"Drive on, Parker," said Lady Penelope decisively. "We won't waste any ammunition at this distance."

His knuckles aching on the steering wheel, The Hood flung his car round the final bend and into the long stretch of shore road. Perspiration stood out on his brow, and his face was whiter than it had ever been before.

Not a man usually given over to fear. The Hood was feeling the pinch this time. Eighty miles of ghastly mountain road, shell fire, close pursuit. It was too much even for the coolest personality.

"Five miles to go! Only five and I'll be free!" He muttered the words aloud. "One day I'll make International Rescue suffer for this! Nobody corners The Hood and gets away with it... nobody!"

The engine screamed in torment as The Hood pushed his foot right down on the floor. Every seam in the car shuddered in protest.

Then . . there it was ahead! The small, deserted boat-house, apparently derelict... but with a fast launch inside. Primed, just waiting for a touch of the starter button to streak out over the sea to the emergency rendezvous point and safety!

The stink of burning rubber curled from the tyres as The Hood skidded to a screeching halt and leaped from the driving seat. Without breaking stride he leaped over the low sea wall and slithered down the shingle. He smashed the padlock from the door of the boathouse with one blow of his fist and jumped into the cockpit of the waiting launch. The engines fired and the boat was off—through the hanging door, past the crumbling jetty—towards the open water.

The Hood glanced quickly back over his shoulder and saw the pink shape of the Rolls streaking along the coastal road.

“You’re too late,” he guffawed. “Too late!”

But in the driving seat of FAB 1, Parker was singularly unperturbed.

“It seems ‘e’s taken to a boat, m’lady. I rather fancy a sea-trip meself.”

“Naturally, Parker. See if you can keep the bumps down to a minimum. I’ve had quite enough shaking for one day.”

“Certainly, m’lady. Hold tight.”

Without a pause in speed, FAB 1 drew level with the jetty and swung round in a blasting, side-slipping turn. Then it roared out over the rumbling planks and shot straight over the end, to land with a colossal splash on the surface of the sea!

“Lowering the hydrofoils now, m'lady.” Parker's hands moved expertly over the controls.

The Hood couldn't believe his eyes. It was like something out of a nightmare.

“I don't believe it! I just don't believe it!”

Behind him, the pink Rolls Royce came skidding across the surface on hydrofoils, and now the arch-criminal slammed the throttle lever of his launch to full speed and desperately strove to keep the distance of two or three hundred yards that separated him from his pursuers.

Frantically, he fished out a pocket radio transmitter and yelled into it. “New rendezvous position. Bearing follows. Make it quick, you fools!”

And the chase continued, sea-mile after sea-mile. “It looks, m'lady,” said Parker, “that our friend has an accomplice lined up.”

The pursuit had taken an erratic course right across a wide and curving bay, and now The Hood's boat was streaking straight for another jetty. But there was no car waiting to pick the mastermind up. This time it was a helicopter, unmarked and anonymous.

“An army-pattern chopper by the look of it, m'lady. No doubt it's 'eavily harmed.”

“Let's hope so, Parker. It may attack, and give us an excuse to shoot it down.”

They could see the helicopter beginning to rise now, and a ladder dangled from its entry port. Abandoning his launch to

crash, The Hood jumped up, caught the swinging end of the ladder, and hauled himself up, hand over hand.

Immediately, the big aircraft turned and came boring in towards FAB 1. It swept overhead, and a couple of small black objects came spinning down.

“Duck, m’lady!” Parker bellowed the command and wrenched the wheel of the Rolls hard over. A pair of deafening explosions rocked the car, and twin columns of water fountained from the sea, close on their offside.

Without waiting for orders, Parker pressed the button that slid twin ack-ack cannons from the wings of the car.

“Okay to fire, m’lady?”

“Yes, Parker. They’re coming in for another try!”

The criss-cross graticule on the gunsight in front of him held all Parker’s attention. The image of the helicopter swam into view on the screen.

“Just a little bit over to the right, old son, thank you very much....” And then Parker’s fist came down, and twin stabs of flame shot from the guns.

FAB 1 lurched crazily as the missiles flared briefly on the underside of the helicopter and then turned the whole machine into a blasting, volcanic wreck above them.

The whirling debris spiralled wildly into the sea and exploded again, scattering wreckage in a pluming fountain for a hundred yards around.

As calmly as though he’d just served tea in Lady Penelope’s stately home, Parker turned round. “Will that be all, m’lady?”

"I think so, Parker. There would seem to be little point in searching for survivors."

"I think not, m'lady."

FAB 1 turned slowly and headed for the beach. "Retracting hydrofoils, m'lady. Where to now?" "Back to the hotel, Parker. I don't think there's any point in making for Glenn Field again. All the excitement will be well over by now."

From the Control Tower at the spaceport, Scott had watched FAB 1 and The Hood's car go streaking through the crash barriers. A discreet message to the Security Police headquarters had been enough to prevent a full-scale chase being organised.

"Gee, when you people take charge," the Central Controller said admiringly, "you certainly don't do things by halves!"

Scott grinned. "How's the pre-flight assembly going?"

The Controller spoke into his microphone. "Zero X flight deck. This is Control. Are you ready to receive nose cone?"

"Roger, Control." Captain Paul Travers's voice came confidently across.

Scott flashed through to Virgil in Thunderbird 2. "Stand by. Zero X lift-off minus 1."

"F.A.B., Scott. Thunderbird 2 standing by."

In the cabin of Zero X, Paul Travers watched the nose cone lift from the apron and move towards him.

As it approached, the cabin darkened, and then the windows were completely shut off by it.

"Operate take-off lighting."

Brad Newman flicked over the switch that flooded the flight deck with artificial light.

"Zero X to Central Control. Nose cone engaged. Standing by for lift-off."

"Thirty seconds to go. Second-by-second countdown commences in nineteen seconds."

Virgil Tracy watched the great bulk of the Martian excursion space ship over to his left. His radio was silent, but the frequency was open. He could hear Scott's breathing clearly, and could imagine his brother ticking off the final moments in his mind. Then... "Ten seconds. Nine. Eight. Seven . . ." Virgil let his hand rest over the firing levers.

"... three. Two. One. *Lift off!*"

In the moment that his own engines fired, Virgil saw the multiple ram-jets at the tail of Zero X burst into life. Then Thunderbird 2 was climbing vertically, above the rapidly receding arrow of the Martian explorer as she picked up speed to hurtle down the miles of runway and lift suddenly and startlingly into the air, a tiny object against the wide, brilliant sky.

"Thunderbird 2 to Mobile Control. Lift-off A.O.K. Proceeding to escort station immediately. All systems go!"

In the Control Tower, Scott heard Virgil's voice almost duplicated by that of Paul Travers... cautious. Tense.

"Zero X to Control. Air speed Mach 1. Rate of ascent three thousand feet per minute. All systems go!"

“Through the sound barrier, Paul.” Greg Martin’s face was tight with anxiety as his Captain swivelled round towards him.

“Relax, Greg. This time everything’s going to be okay.”

But the minds of the Zero X crew were all focused on what might happen. Suppose even the amazing security success of International Rescue had failed to find every loophole? Suppose there was going to be a repeat of the previous launch tragedy? Could they take the same let-down twice? Come to that, suppose something different went wrong this time... something more deadly...?

Captain Travers forced the thoughts away from him. Heck, they weren’t in this business for fun. They all knew the risks.

“Check that trim, Greg. How many degrees are we out this time?”

Greg Martin laughed. The tension was broken. “We’re bang on the button. Paul. Height fifty thousand feet, speed Mach two point eight, and we’re riding on air!”

“You can say that again!” Suddenly, Paul Travers felt a surge of confidence, a vast, gripping hand of excitement that nothing could quell. Behind them lay years of waiting, month after month of training and re-training. A lifetime of charts and tables, conferences and plans. And ahead....

“Oh, boy! They’d better have the welcome flags good and ready! Just six weeks from now and we’ll be walking high, wide and handsome down the main street of Mars! ”

“Six weeks of splendid isolation with you guys,” grinned Brad Newman. “Like on a space-borne desert island. Did

anyone bother to check whether we all have the same interests?"

"Cut out the wisecracking, you fellers." Greg Martin sounded indignant. "What is this, a school bus? Come on, Paul—tell Central Control we're about to quit the Earth's atmosphere."

"Zero X within rarified region, Scott." From the cabin of Thunderbird 2, Virgil Tracy throttled down and watched the pencil of shock wave from the spacecraft high above him tail off out of sight.

"Returning to base now. It's up to Alan in Thunderbird 3 from here in on."

"Okay, Thunderbird 2." Scott gave a quick thumbs-up to the Controller beside him. "Come in Thunderbird 3. Can you hear me, Alan?"

"Mobile Control, I hear you." A freak drop in atmospherics made the astronaut's voice sound as though he were in the same room.

"Video radar scanner is on, and I am expecting to see Zero X in approximately forty seconds. The ship should pass within a hundred miles of me, so I'll get a perfect view."

"Confirm her speed and direction when you see her, and then return to International Rescue base. Is that clear?"

"F.A.B."

Scott stood up. "I'm going to freshen up now," he said with extreme satisfaction. "How about you?" The Controller shook his head. "My post is right here until Zero X is clear and the lifting bodies are flown back. You can bring me up some coffee, if you like."

"I think International Rescue is capable of providing that small service," smiled Scott, and walked out.

"Height one hundred thousand feet, speed Mach three point two."

Greg Martin read off the routine check to his captain, and Paul Travers confirmed to Ground Control. "Start countdown for chemical rockets. Brad." "Commencement of countdown coming up on computer now."

"Stand by to release lifting bodies. How's the elevating gear?"

Greg Martin nodded. "Standing by. Height one hundred and twelve thousand."

The altimeter was ticking off the thousands of feet with incredible rapidity. One hundred and seventeen. One hundred and twenty....

"Increase rate of ascent to Red six."

There was no surplus conversation on the flight deck now. This was perhaps the most critical stage of the initial phase-programme.

"Computer reports jettison lifting bodies, ten seconds, sir." Brad Newman looked up from his complex of dials and meters. "Release on green light."

"Roger."

"Five seconds. Four. Three. Two. One."

The green light flashed on, and automatic flaps covering the two punch-buttons governing release of the lifting bodies

fell away. The first two fingers of Paul Travers's right hand stabbed out and hit them squarely, and the double thud of twin explosions vibrated through the main body of Zero X.

The two delta-wing lifting bodies separated smoothly from the fuselage of the space ship and seemed to hang for a moment, pacing their mother craft. Then they curved outwards and downwards as their radio controls took over to skim them back towards earth. In the same moment, the chemical rockets fired to lash Zero X upwards at ever-increasing speed.

“Air speed three thousand knots. Four thousand. Building to seven thousand in four seconds.” There was no disguising the awe in the navigator's voice. “Leaving Earth's atmosphere. Computer reports jettison nose cone ten seconds.”

“Roger.”

Again, a green light glowed on the instrument panel beneath Paul Travers's hands. Again, an automatic flap fell away from a button marked with the letters ‘N.C.’. Again, the Captain's finger jabbed out, and the arrowed nose cone flung forward from the craft and tumbled slowly away, almost unaffected by the minimal pull of gravity.

“Escape velocity achieved.”

Outside, the vast panorama of the sky was a light purple. An emptiness so total that not one of the crew could find the words to describe it.

“Computer reports chemical rockets burn out five seconds. Four, three, two, one....”

And silence. A ponderous silence that lasted for seconds. Then the crew were aware of the light background whine of the electric machinery around them, and each man visibly relaxed.

Paul Travers spoke soberly into the radio. "Central Control, this is Zero X. Lifting bodies and nose cone successfully jettisoned. We are now outside the Earth's atmosphere."

He turned to his colleagues and said: "Okay. Switch in Arc Jet Engine. This is where the big journey begins."

From his position in orbit, Alan Tracy saw the slim dart of the Mars-bound space ship glow brightly for a second on his video radar screen, its shell glowing with the last of the friction-heat of the earth's atmosphere. Then it was lost to his view, showing up merely as a blip on the auto scanner.

"Thunderbird 3 to International Rescue. She's clear, and bang on course! What a fantastic sight!" "Okay, Alan. Your watch is over. Clear orbit and return to base. Over and out."

The tail rockets of the International Rescue craft fired, and the ship dipped her nose back towards earth. She left behind her a sky deepening through the richest violet to impenetrable black, unwinking stars blazing like a distant backcloth of pure white gems.

Somewhere against them, was the tiny dot in space that was Zero X, flying silently onward on its unalterable course.

# CHAPTER FIVE

“I HAVE A message for you from Zero X.” The Central Controller had come down to the spaceport staff room where Scott had been putting his feet up for a spell. Now he sat up and swung his legs to the floor.

“I gave them the barest details of the sabotage attempt,” continued the Controller, parking himself in an easy chair. “And it seems Doctors Grant and Pierce had just told ‘em, too. Anyhow, they asked me to pass on their thanks and congratulations.”

“Glad it all worked out so well,” said Scott. “I’ll see that everyone in my organisation gets their message. Oh, by the way—you haven’t time-locked that control room door again, have you?”

“Nope. Just left the guard there. I figured you’d want to get your equipment out pretty quickly.” Scott stood up and stretched. “I’ll organise it now. Besides, there’s another routine call I have to make.” He strolled out of the lounge and made his way back up to the control tower. Outside, the launch apron was quiet now. Only the ring of guards around the slender shape of Thunderbird 1.

Scott switched on the console and twirled a dial. “This is International Rescue calling Lady Penelope. Can you hear me, Penny?”

Immediately, Penelope’s voice came over. “I don’t think we’ll have any more trouble from our saboteur, Scott. We managed to- um, eliminate him.”

“Well done, Penny.”

"It's been quite a hectic time for all of us, Scott. You don't suppose we could all get together for a drink tonight? There's a rather fab night-club called the Swinging Star near my hotel. What do you say?" Scott was emphatic. "F.A.B."

And then came the interruption. Virgil Tracy's voice, breaking in on the wavelength. "Oh, er, hi there, folks. I just happened to be monitoring your frequency, and..."

Scott laughed. "Trust you. Dad ought to have christened you Sherlock."

"Well, Virgil?" Now it was Lady Penelope again. "What do you say? Are you game, too?"

"You bet!"

"Then we've got a date," said Scott finally. "I'll just call Dad and let him know what's going on." Far across the Pacific, in the lounge on Tracy Island, the eyes of Scott's portrait on the wall began to flash on and off. Jeff Tracy glanced across, and pressed the button that lifted the communications microphone from his desk. "Go ahead, Scott." There was a moment's stunned silence as Scott gave his message. Tin-Tin came into the lounge just as Jeff gathered in his breath for an incredulous salvo.

"You're going *where*!"

"Er ... the Swinging Star, father. It's some kind of night club."

Jeff passed a weary hand across his forehead. "But that means you won't be back until morning!" "You can reach us easily, Dad. If there's any sort of emergency."

There was a slight vibration running through the house. A familiar shuddering that always accompanied the return to

base of Thunderbird 3. For once, Jeff Tracy didn't even notice it.

"Now listen to me, Scott. I understand you need a break, but this is a tough job we're doing here."

A calendar on Jeff's desk flipped over, revealing a lighted screen with 'Thunderbird 3' on it. Automatically, Jeff turned it back over, cutting the bleeping that had begun to sound from it. Then he caught Tin-Tin's eye, and realised that Alan was home.

"Oh, well. This once then, Scott. I guess we can cope while you're whooping it up."

"Gee, thanks, Dad!" Scott sounded enthusiastic. "I'll make arrangements here at Glenn Field so that they can reach us anytime. Don't forget now... we're at the Swinging Star."

"Right, Scott. The Swinging Star." Jeff closed transmission and jotted the name down on a pad.

"The Swinging Star?" Alan's voice made him glance up. His son had come up through the floor in the launch couch.

"Yea. that's right, Alan. Some sort of night spot. They're all going out tonight to celebrate. Scott, Virgil and Lady Penelope. At first I thought you were in on the swindle, too."

Alan made a throwaway gesture with his right hand. "No such luck Trust me to wind up back here when there's a party on!"

And then he had a sudden inspiration, and his face brightened. "Say, Tin-Tin. Why don't we go off to the mainland tonight, just the two of us?"

"That would be lovely, Alan!" Tin-Tin clasped her hands together, and her eyes were shining. "I can wear my new dress."

The explosion that came from Jeff Tracy wiped the smiles off their faces in a second.

"What in thunder goes on around here? Have you all gone crazy? This is International Rescue, hang it!"

"Gee! But Dad, . . .

"Don't 'but' me, Alan. You ought to know as well as I do that we can't leave the base unmanned. We're at half-strength as it is! No, I'm sorry. You and Gordon have got to remain here."

Jeff turned to Tin-Tin, and his voice was softer, if just as firm. "Sorry, Tin-Tin."

"That's alright, Mr. Tracy. I understand."

"Well, I don't!" Alan spat the words out. "I'm going to bed."

He whirled on his heel and strode to the door, rudely ignoring Tin-Tin. "Aren't you going to have some coffee, Alan?" she asked, a crestfallen note in her voice.

"No thanks. It keeps me awake."

A big yellow moon hung over Tracy Island, and the soft light in the lounge was the only one burning in the villa.

Upstairs, in Alan's bedroom, the young astronaut lay in restless sleep, turning from side to side. Now and then he'd groan from the depths of a dream, and now blunted words mumbled from his half parted lips.

"We're all going to the Swinging Star... no, Alan, have you gone crazy? Can't leave the base half-manned. The Swinging Star. The Swinging, swinging, swinging Star..."

Stars. Yes, there were millions. And boy, were they swinging! Alan stood there on the edge of a hazy nothingness, confident and balanced in his blue evening suit. There was a go-to-blazes tilt to his spangled top hat, and the silver-topped cane in his fingers twirled nonchalantly.

White marble columns stretched away ahead of him into the distance. Somewhere, there was the musical tinkle of a playing fountain.

"Penelope, you're late." Alan looked down at the diamond-studded watch on his wrist and sighed impatiently. And then he heard it—the unmistakable note of the Rolls Royce's horn as FAB 1 glided soundlessly to the foot of a long flight of marble steps that suddenly appeared in front of him. "Why, here she is!"

Alan raced down towards the car, as Parker stepped out to swing open the door for him. The chauffeur wore a pink uniform to match the Rolls.

"Hello, Penny." Alan held his breath. He'd never seen Lady Penelope looking so lovely. Maybe it was the hair. Maybe the long stole of white ostrich feathers, the beautiful dress made entirely of turquoise sequins. Or maybe it was just Penny.

"Have I kept you waiting, Alan?"

"Of course not. You're dead on time."

The door closed noiselessly as he got in, and the car slid forward along a marble ribbon of road supported somewhere in the sky by endless pillars of glittering stone.

“Where to, m’lady?” Parker’s voice was soft and modulated.

“Why, the Swinging Star, of course.”

The car was gathering speed. Alan felt himself pressed back against the luxurious cushions.

“Now, m’lady?”

“Now, Parker.”

“Will you give me the countdown, m’lady?”

Lady Penelope leaned forward and began to count.

“Is this the way to the Swinging Star?” asked Alan, drowsy with the heavy perfume in the car.

Somewhere behind, there was the dull double thud of rockets igniting, and now FAB 1 lifted its bonnet and plunged upwards through the midnight blue of the sky, the ribbon of road dwindling away to nothing far below.

“Say, we’re flying!” Alan looked incredulously out of the window at the stardust flashing by.

“Naturally,” said Lady Penelope, “Left along the Milky Way, Parker. Then right past Jupiter, and you’ll see the Swinging Star ahead of you.”

“Very good, m’lady.”

A huge silver star hung in the sky ahead—an enormous, fantastic glitter of a facade where the sign flashed on and off above it. The Swinging Star. The Swinging Star. Automobiles were parked around it, drifting and shifting to the faintest breath of night air.

“It’s fabulous!” Alan hadn’t realised they’d left FAB 1. Now he was standing, with Penelope’s arm linked in his, looking up at the massive entrance doors.

“I thought you’d like it.”

There may have been other people around. Alan didn’t notice. Dazzled and awestruck, he walked with Lady Penelope into the striking black and white of the club, vaguely aware that a liveried waiter was ushering them to the triangular corner table where champagne and glasses were already waiting.

On a raised stage, a four-piece group was playing. Alan recognised the familiar faces of the internationally famous Shadows.

“Gee, this place is sweller than swell!”

“Have some more champagne, Alan.” Lady Penelope was filling up his glass.

Alan wasn’t aware that he’d had any yet, and he looked vaguely surprised. Then he remembered a polite question he ought to ask. “Did you enjoy your visit here with Scott and Virgil, Penny?”

Lady Penelope chuckled mysteriously. “We didn’t come to *this* Swinging Star. Alan. This one’s reserved especially for you.”

He blushed. “Oh. Er, oh gee! Er—have some more champagne yourself.”

Then there was a meal. Lots more wine. Coffee and a cigar for Alan ... a cigarette in the long ebony holder for Lady Penelope.

"Gee, that was even better than Grandma's cooking." Alan lolled back and watched as the beat group came back on the stand. "They serve the best space delicacies here," agreed Lady Penelope.

A singer joined the group. Cliff Richard junior. The manager announced him as 'The Biggest Star in the Universe, come to sing at the Brightest Star in the Universe'.

"I sure hope this never ends," murmured Alan.

But he spoke too soon. Almost in the same moment, a faint, insistent bleeping came from his watch. He looked at it, and the dial clouded over to reveal the radioed picture of his father.

"I'm sure sorry to disturb you, son. But this is an emergency."

Alan frowned. "Look, father, er... can't Scott and Virgil handle this? I'm kind of tied up right now."

"I'm afraid Scott and Virgil are away enjoying themselves as usual, Alan. You're the only one I can rely on."

Alan felt himself swelling with pride, and glanced at Lady Penelope to make sure she was watching. She was, and her face was glowing with admiration.

"Okay, Dad. I guess I understand. I'll be down right away."

He turned to the girl at his side. Now he felt important.. commanding. "Come on, Penelope. We've gotta go."

"Oh, Alan... must we?"

"I'm afraid so. Duty calls."

Alan grasped Lady Penelope by the hand and led her out of the night club. There was a strange, chill wind blowing now as FAB 1 seemed to materialise and glide in front of them. A white mist swirled round the steps of the Swinging Star.

Parker opened the door of FAB 1 from inside, and Lady Penelope stepped in, "Mind the gap, m'lady." cautioned Parker.

"Thank you, Parker. We don't want to *fall* back to earth, do we?"

Alan began to step forward, but the Rolls Royce edged and drifted away from him. He jerked quickly back on to the steps of the Swinging Star. Now the car was a hundred yards away, but Lady Penelope was still beckoning. "Come on, Alan! But mind the gap! *Mind the gap!*"

"I can't possibly make it!" Alan shouted the words, nonplussed.

Lady Penelope's voice came mockingly now. "What's the matter, Alan? Don't tell me you're afraid!"

"I am not afraid!"

"A brave astronaut like you, afraid!"

"I am *not!*" yelled Alan. Desperately, he lurched forward, knowing that the gap was impossible... and then he was falling, falling . . . , the tiny globe of the earth rushing up to meet him and Lady Penelope's laughter hammering in his ears!

"Alan! Alan! Are you all right? For Pete's sake, where are you?"

Jeff Tracy had rushed into the bedroom at the first sound of his son's yells, to find the bed empty and the clothes strewn about on the floor.

Then, slowly, from the far side of the bed, Alan appeared, his hair rumpled and his eyes bewildered and blinking.

"Gee! I—I guess I had a nightmare, Dad. I fell out of bed."

"You want me to fix you some hot cocoa?"

"No thanks, Dad. I'll be okay now. It was a crazy dream. I was miles up in the sky, and the earth was just a tiny, distant button...."

"Look at the Earth, Brad. It's just like a tiny, distant button against the stars." Greg Martin glanced back from one of the video ports in the main body of Zero X.

"We'll soon have a job picking the old home planet out at all," muttered the space ship's navigator. "Isn't it crazy? From here, it's just another dot in the sky ... yet it's teeming with life. How can you look at it and say 'there are people up there'?" "Sure. When you look at it like this, it makes you realise there's got to be a similar life-form somewhere in the universe. Gee, the whole set-up's so vast, there are probably millions of other inhabited planets floating around in space."

Ahead of Zero X, and way down on the left of them, was the distinctive orb of Mars. It was about the same size as the moon appears from the earth.

"What do you think, Paul? Do you figure there's life on Mars?" Bard Newman stared forward at the criss-crossed surface of their destination.

“It’s hard even to guess, Brad.” Paul Travers sounded guarded. “All the exploratory unmanned ships sent there reported negative. But heck, when you think of a planet’s total surface area, you realise that a handful of spot landings here and there won’t tell you much.”

“Sure enough,” agreed Greg Martin. “Just imagine Martians sending a spaceprobe to Earth, and it landed in the middle of the Sahara Desert. Couldn’t you see the Martian headlines? ‘Earth a barren waste of hot rocks and sand. No life whatever on this arid planet’.”

“Let’s just hope we don’t land in the middle of anywhere like that, then.” grinned Captain Travers.

The journey through the black void of space had so far been uneventful. Pre-programmed computers had kept them rigidly on course, and all systems were still go. The crew had gone through the routine motions of watching instruments, reporting to base, eating and sleeping, and now they were fully accustomed to the weightless conditions in the cabin. Aft, the two scientists had kept very much to themselves, taking photographs, making charts and plans and keeping a day-by-day log of the space flight.

Amazingly, nobody in the five-man team had got on anyone else’s nerves ... a tribute to the preselection committee back on earth.

“You know,” said Paul Travers some time during the fifth week out, “we must be basically a bunch of very dull guys. Do you realise that not one of us has an irritating habit?”

“That’s for sure,” agreed Brad. “Joe Wiseman was originally scheduled to be navigator this trip, until they discovered he was always clicking his thumb joints. Imagine—six weeks of listening to a guy clicking his thumbs!”

"I get stomach-flutter," confessed Greg Martin, "but nobody can hear it. I'm getting it now, as a matter of fact. Just looking out at that big football dead ahead."

Mars was large in front of them now. So close that they could see the faint wisps of cloud around the planet. Away on their right, one of the two moons was just visible over the edge.

"We'll be ready to make landfall in exactly eighty hours time," said Paul Travers. "We all know what to do when the moment comes?"

"I know I have to stay up in close orbit with the main body," grumbled Brad Newman. "While you fellers and the doctors go down for a trip round the sights."

"So you might be the lucky one," scoffed Greg. "Who knows what we're going to find down there! Little guys, maybe, with antenna-heads."

"Or maybe big guys with antenna-heads." Paul leaned back and yawned. "We'll know soon enough." Zero X sped on through the emptiness. The time recorder seemed to move painfully slowly on the last legs of the journey, but at last the fateful day came round. Six weeks exactly since blast-off from Glenn Field, and at last the landing computer triggered itself into life.

"Computer reports fifteen minutes to separation of M.E.V. from main body, Paul."

"Okay. Greg. Brad, you'd better move back immediately to main body control. Instruct Pierce and Grant to come forward, will you?"

"Roger, sir. I guess I don't have to tell you that I wish you the best of luck."

Moments later. Doctors Ray Pierce and Tony Grant joined Paul and Greg in the cabin of the Martian Excursion Vehicle. The click of control switches swung out the two supplementary couches, and Grant and Pierce strapped themselves in.

“Approaching edge of Martian atmosphere.” Greg was watching the dial reports of the computer intently.

“Stand by. Computer reports sixty seconds to separation.”

“M.E.V. chemical rockets activated and ready for ignition.” Paul’s hands flew over the control buttons in front of him.

“Thirty seconds.”

“Watch for the green light. Release levers unlocked.”

“Ten seconds. Nine. Eight....”

“Side thrust jets on main body firing. Ship turning in line for circular orbit. All systems A.O.K.”

“Four seconds. Three Two. One. *Go!*”

The release lever slammed forward, and there was the faintest sensation of a kick in the back as the M.E.V. sped away from the parent craft.

“Entering Martian atmosphere. Air speed six thousand, red.”

The long curve of the Martian horizon tilted up towards them, and light blue cloud hung in scattered trails, far below. Now the darkness of space had lightened to a deep red, and the M.E.V. shuddered slightly to the resistance of atmospheric gas.

“Reduce speed. Three thousand. Two-fifty.”

They were in a vertical dive, and already, the most prominent features of the landscape were clearly outlined. Great areas of bright-coloured mountain mountain range, flat expanses of apparently featureless plain.

“Cut rockets one and three. Activate primary retros! ”

The high cloud ceiling whipped past them, and now they were coming down. Captain Travers hauling on the controls to flatten out the dive.

“Height one hundred thousand. Rate of descent one thousand per minute. Take it easy, Paul.”

“It sure looks empty down there!” Ray Pierce was gazing fascinated from the forward observation windows. “No sign at all of building or cultivation.”

“My instruments are giving me an atmosphere content reading on the 0-negative scale,” muttered Doctor Grant.

“Translate, Tony. What’s that mean?” Greg turned to the scientist for a brief, momentary glance.

“It means minimal oxygen content. There sure can’t be life down there exactly as we know it.”

“Not that absence of oxygen necessarily rules out the presence of life,” interrupted his colleague. “Temperature and moisture content are okay, for example.”

The M.E.V. swooped low over the craggy, unfriendly landscape. Towering mountain ranges reared into the red sky, and long drifts of purple and green sand spread away into the distance.

“I’m taking her down,” said Captain Travers. “Fire full retros and cut entry rockets!”

Blasting flame and smoke, the first manned vehicle ever to arrive on Mars made a perfect touchdown.

There was absolute silence as the men from Zero X sat and took in their surroundings. At close range, the surface of the sand was scattered with thousands of chunks of translucent stone.

“The surface is fine and solid.” Paul Travers broke the silence.  
“Shall we roll?”

Slowly, the M.E.V. lifted as the captain lowered the compound tracks beneath it. Conventional motors took over and roared into life, steering the vehicle between pinnacles of jagged rock.

Here and there, scattered haphazardly over the surface of the sand, coils of rock about six feet high looked like squeezings from a tube of toothpaste.

Now Brad Newman's voice came thinly over the intercom.  
“M.E.V. from Zero X, How's it going down there?”

“Okay, Brad. So far, no problems. As yet, no signs of life.”

“Fine. I'm just going into second phase of orbit. Gee, I wish I was down there with you.”

After a few moments, Paul halted the M.E.V. and turned to Doctor Grant. “Well, Tony? What do you think?”

Doctor Grant smiled his scientist's smile and snapped shut the book in which he'd been making notes. “My first thought is to get as many samples back to earth as possible, so that we can look into the whole question of the possibility of life existing on this planet”

“Sure, but what’s your initial reaction?” “Certainly the atmosphere is too thin to sustain life as we know it, and it looks as if the early Martian photographs are going to prove right, inasmuch as there’s no concentration of water up here.”

“You can tell all this from your instruments, Doc?” Greg Martin sounded impressed.

“Eighty percent instruments, twenty percent intuition!”

Doctor Pierce chimed in. “I agree with all Doctor Grant has just said, but I’ve always been fascinated by that phrase, “life as we know it”. I have a feeling that we may encounter life as we *don’t* know it.”

He glanced out of the window and waved his hand towards the curious litter of spiral rock formations all around them.

“These strange things seem to be all over the place around here. Don’t ask me why, but they worry me.” Doctor Grant laid a cautioning hand on his companion’s arm. “Now, Ray. Don’t let your imagination run riot.”

“Yeah, Tony. I know it’s all too easy to get the willies in a place like this, but can you account for the strange formation of these rocks?”

Tony Grant pondered for a moment. “My first impression is that when the crust of this planet was very thin it was struck by meteorites. As the meteorites punctured the shell, so the hot rock exuded on to the planet surface rather like toothpaste from a tube.” “That’s a good theory, Tony. Now explain to me how the exuding rock wrapped itself into coils.”

Paul Travers decided to interrupt before the two scientists launched themselves into a theoretical argument.

"Clearly, gentlemen, this is one of the many things we have to investigate. We're falling behind schedule, so can we move on?"

Grant grinned. "Sure, Paul. Sorry about that."

As the M.E.V. moved on through the gulches and ravines of the wild landscape, the sinister coils of rock began to grow more numerous. Several times, the vehicle had to change direction to avoid whole outcrops of them.

Even the placid Greg Martin was finding the peculiar formations getting on his nerves.

"You know, Ray, I don't like the look of these things, either, though I'm sure they're just rock. I've been watching them very closely, and there's no sign of movement."

For once, Doctor Grant didn't scoff. "I've been thinking, too. I guess my theory about them wasn't so good, really. In my opinion, we ought to take a sample back to earth "

Ray Pierce turned to Paul. "Could you break one up for us? Then I can go out and collect some pieces."

Captain Travers nodded and used the brake lever on one set of his vehicle's tracks. The M.E.V. swung round towards one of the coils, and halted a dozen yards away. Now a touch on a red button, and a small gun rose from the vehicle's roof.

"Not too big a charge now, Paul. I want to get a sizeable piece."

"Okay, Ray."

"Oh, and Ray ... as soon as you fire, stand by at the ready."

Travers swung round to face the scientist, his eyebrows lifted in surprise. "At the ready? What for?" Doctor Pierce shrugged. "I don't really know. I've just got a feeling, that's all. Just be ready, eh?" Carefully, the Zero X captain aligned his gunsight on the base of the coil of rock. He glanced to make sure that Doctor Pierce had clambered into his space suit. "Airlock ready for the doc, Greg?"



*... the men ducked as a volley of flaming projectiles struck home and spilled down the windows in a blazing stream.*

“Roger.”

“Right. Stand by.”

Paul triggered the firing button, and the brief flare of a projectile streaked from the muzzle of the gun to explode the rock-coil into fragments.

Immediately the thin echoes of the shot had died away. Ray Pierce dropped to the stony ground outside the M.E.V. and picked his way forward to the heap of smoking fragments. All eyes in the M.E.V. were on him.

But behind the vehicle, unnoticed by anyone, something was happening to another of the curious coils. There came the soft rasp of stone on stone as the coils began to move!

Suddenly, the whole length reared up like a snake, and a single red eye opened in the horrific, granite-scaled head, to glare balefully at the scene in front of it.

Then a cavernous black mouth opened beneath the eye, and with a scream like that of a hurtling shell, a globule of liquid fire the size of a football streaked from the creature’s throat to explode in a scatter of blazing fluid against the hull of the M.E.V.!

“Greg! Look at that!” Suddenly ashen-faced, Paul Travers had whipped round in time to see the rock-snake fire its second fireball.

“Quick! Doctor Pierce! Back inside!”

In a second, other coils had unfolded, and a deluge of fire spattered over the vehicle even as Doctor Pierce scrambled frantically back through the airlock. He tore the suit off with

trembling fingers. "There's life all right! Let's get the heck out of here!"

The M.E.V. spun round on its axis—to find its path blocked by a whole battery of the fearsome rock-snakes. Instinctively, the men ducked as a volley of flaming projectiles struck home and spilled down the windows in a blazing stream.

"What the heck do we do? They'll roast us alive!"

Already, they could feel the vehicle rocking under an incessant barrage of hits.

"The temperature of these fireballs is intense... incredible! Look at the gauges!" It was possible that the holocaust around them could reach even the fantastic heat of atmospheric re-entry.

Blinded by fire, Paul Travers could only steer the vehicle by instinct. He felt impact after impact as the M.E.V. crashed into the attackers, saw the white-hot surge of flame as they disintegrated.

"Zero X from M.E.V.!" Greg Martin was roaring frantically into the radio. "Come in Zero X! We are under attack from a form of life we do not understand! Require immediate rendezvous with main body!"

From orbit, Brad Newman's voice was controlled and reassuring. "I'm just coming round on third orbit. Will be in rendezvous position in four minutes."

Paul Travers grabbed the microphone. "Okay, Brad. We'll continue to take evasive action down here until you're in position. Give us lift-off clearance the second it's possible."

The Captain felt Doctor Grant shaking him urgently by the arm. "Paul! We've gotta lift off immediately. I mean right now! We just don't know what damage these things can do to us!"

"Take it easy, Doctor." Greg Martin was fully in control of himself again. "We can't lift off until the main ship's in the correct position, otherwise we'll run out of gas and be stranded in space."

For a brief instant, they were out of immediate fire... but only for an instant. They just had time to see the whole surface of the planet—alive with the things, all rearing their heads, their vicious eyes blazing. Then a fresh salvo, and the whole ground turned into an inferno as fireball after fireball came cascading across to envelop the M.E.V.

The whole armament of the Martian Excursion Vehicle was in action now. Even aimed blind, the cannons could hardly miss. Every second, fountains of liquid fire shot to the heavens as a rock-snake's head was blown from its body.

"Paul!" Greg's voice was hoarse with strain. "Part of the outer casing's actually on fire! We'll never make it! "

"Zero X from M.E.V. For Pete's sake, Brad! What's the position?"

Brad Newman sounded as desperate as his imperiled colleagues. "Approaching orbital position. Starting countdown now. Rendezvous lift-off minus one hundred seconds."

Paul brushed the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. His eyes flashed over the dials in front of him. "All systems still go. If only we can hold out! Once we're in space, we'll stop burning." The rock-snakes had doubled their

ferocity. There must have been hundreds of them firing at once.

The whole surface of the plateau was bubbling with fire, and the very rocks were exploding under the intense heat. Great chunks began to rain down on the roof of the unprotected M.E.V.

“The heck with it!” Paul Travers suddenly thrust the firing levers forward. “Skip the countdown! We’re going up now! ”

“Paul! The fuel! We might not make it!” But Greg Martin’s voice was drowned in the kicking explosions as the M.E.V.’s thrust-rockets burst into life.

# CHAPTER SIX

THE HEAT WAS INTENSE. A fierce sun blazed down on the swimming pool outside the villa on Tracy Island, and it was a shirts-and-shorts day.

Jeff Tracy and Scott sat by the pool, shaded by a large red and white beach umbrella. They were deep in a discussion over modifications to be carried out on Thunderbird 1.

“Brains says the overhaul’s possible, Dad. Isn’t that right, Brains?” Scott looked over to where Brains and Virgil, beneath a similar umbrella, were playing a game of chess.

“Check,” said Brains.

“Check?” Virgil, chin cupped in hands, looked sharply up from the chess-board. “What in heck are you talking about, Brains?” And then he realised, and shrugged foolishly.

“Why don’t you four stop trying to carry on two conversations at once, and come on in?” Tin-Tin called from the blue depths of the pool. “The water’s...”

The sentence ended in a choked, bubbling yell as Gordon, having just tugged her ankles, shot to the surface with his right hand in a neat saluting position. “Thunderbird 4 at your service, ma’am!” Alone in a hammock, Alan Tracy slowly set down his magazine glared out at the others. “Can’t a guy get any peace around here?” He was still smarting over the business of the Swinging Star—both the reality *and* the dream!

“Snap out of it, Alan.” Jeff spoke cheerfully. “Think of John, sitting up there in Thunderbird 5, all on his lonesome. No

sunbathing for him.” Alan smiled sheepishly, flung away the magazine, and dived into the pool.

“I expect John’s keeping tabs on the Zero X flight, father,” said Scott. “They should be on Mars by now. Boy, I’d sure like to be with them. It must be real exciting—like being an explorer or a pioneer.”

“Exactly, Scott. Man’s been waiting for a moment like this ever since the last corner of earth was finally penetrated and mapped. There’s a restlessness in human nature that’s never going to be satisfied. Even when they’ve eventually covered every inch of Mars, it’ll be something else. All the planets of the solar system... then beyond. When the human race has done it all—maybe in millions of years time—life’s gonna be miserable. There’ll be nothing new to find.”

“That’s too deep for me at the moment, Dad.” Jeff’s eldest son smiled to himself. “Right now, my inquisitive human nature’s entirely taken up with the Martian expedition.”

Jeff Tracy picked up a long glass from the table in front of him. There was a long swizzle stick with a decorated plastic head at the top of it, and he gripped it between the fingers of his right hand and twisted it. “Let’s see what the latest news is,” he said.

Far above the earth, in the orbiting satellite station, Thunderbird 5, John Tracy heard the familiar bleeping and saw the call-sign light up on the main communications console.

“Thunderbird 5. Come in, International Rescue.” “This is International Rescue. What’s the latest on the Martian Expedition, John?”

“Just a second. Dad. I’ll check out the tape.”

John moved to a huge bank of instruments and selected a channel on the multi-recorder. Immediately, the general whine of multiple messages cleared, and he heard the distinct voices of Brad Newman and Paul Travers, far away across space. John listened for a few moments, his face hardening. Then he returned to the console.

“Looks like they’re having some trouble, Dad. The M.E.V. has run into hostile life of some form, and it’s trying to make an emergency rendezvous with the main body of Zero X above the planet. I’d better keep the monitor open, huh?”

“Do that, John. Let us know immediately of any further developments.”

“F.A.B. I sure hope those guys get everything sorted out smoothly.”

Alan Tracy had heard the message come through from his brother. He hauled himself out of the pool and stood, towelling himself, at his father’s side.

“What happens. Dad? Supposing they get into real difficulties up there. Could Thunderbird 3... ?” Jeff Tracy shook his head. “Whatever happens, we can hardly take independent action until our assistance is asked for, Alan. That’s one of the rules of this organisation that wasn’t made to be broken.” Alan looked disappointed. “It seems I’m due to miss out on every darned thing,” he muttered.

“At least you got the watchdog job when Zero X made its lift-off.” Now it was Gordon Tracy’s turn to sound truculent. “My role in this whole business has been strictly nil.”

Jeff Tracy’s fist slammed down on the table, and the glasses on it jumped. “Will you two cut it out?” He glared at them angrily, forcing them to silence. “If I have to tell you boys

once more that we're not in this game for kicks. I'll really blow my top." "Boys will be boys," grinned Scott smugly, chucking his younger brothers under the chin and racing off as they each swung a punch. Then he slipped and fell against Virgil, so that the chess board and all the pieces shot away and scattered into the pool.

Jeff Tracy groaned aloud as all five rushed away around the corner of the villa, Scott yelling for mercy at the top of his voice.

"Migawsh. what did I do to deserve them?" he said as he flopped so heavily back into his chair so that the umbrella keeled forward and folded up over his head.

If the Tracys had kept a cat, it would have laughed. As it was, Tin-Tin did the job equally as well.

In the control tower at Glenn Field, the Central Controller was also feeling the intense summer heat. There was no swimming pool for him, not while he was on his eight hours of rotational standby duty on the Martian Expedition communications link.

The worry of what was happening up on the red planet was enough for him, without the additional calls being made every few minutes by the agitated President of the Martian Exploration Committee. The man had been beside himself with nerves ever since the first suspicion of trouble had come through from Brad Newman.

"Nothing new to report, sir," said the Controller for the umpteenth time. "Main body of Zero X is approaching rendezvous position. Newman reports M.E.V. has lifted off ahead of schedule due to danger of destruction by fire." He paused as a light began to flash on and off in front of him. "Hold it. Something new's coming through now."

"About to leave Martian atmosphere." Paul Travers spoke clearly into the microphone, aware that Brad Newman would be relaying his voice to earth. "It looks like we've made it!'"

Outside, as the sky turned to black, the flames surrounding the M.E.V. doused to nothing.

"I've got your blip on the radar, Paul." Brad's voice crackled over the radio. "You are approaching Zero X orbital path. Stand by to fire retros on countdown beginning now. Five, four, three, two, one..."

Paul clipped the switch, and the powerful thrust-jets halted the M.E.V. so that it hung motionless in space.

"Okay, Paul. Zero X closing fast. Range about fifty miles. Rendezvous in ten and one half minutes." "Thanks, Brad. I guess we're clear. All systems are still apparently at green, although we seem to have an intermittent fault on our lifting body radio control unit. While we're waiting for you, I'm going to radio a full and detailed report direct to earth." "Roger, M.E.V. Oh—and congratulations, by the way. You sure had me worried."

Paul Travers cut to direct transmission, and began the full account of the Martian landing. His words flashed across space to control, intercepted on the journey by the big recorders on the operations deck of Thunderbird 5. From there, they were relayed direct on open network to the concealed loudspeakers in the recreations room in the Tracys' villa, where Jeff, Scott and Virgil were playing a three-sided game of snooker.

"Let's face it," said Jeff, carefully aligning his cue. "The operation came pretty near to failure." There was a satisfying click, and the ball kissed a red and sank it in a corner pocket.

"These—er—so-called rock snakes, father. What do you make of them?" Scott winced as the chalk squealed on the end of his cue.

"Search me. Until further landings are made, I guess we won't know much more than we do now." Virgil turned from the score indicator. "It seems that the damage to the M.E.V. isn't too bad. There shouldn't be any problems about re-entry, that's for sure."

"They've done it on practice runs a hundred times before. It should be okay." Jeff stood back and watched Scott take a long shot up the table that missed completely.

"Do we rendezvous with them, Dad?" His eldest son turned to face him, eyebrows raised.

"They haven't requested it, but all the same I think we should be on our toes."

"What's the scheduled date for re-entry into the earth's atmosphere, anyway?"

Jeff screwed up his left eye and did a rapid calculation. "Six weeks from now. That'll be the morning of September 2nd." He glanced at Virgil, apparently lost in some day dream of his own. "Come on, son. I reckon it gives us time to finish this game ... *if* you wake up and take your shot."

"Sorry, Dad. I was—er—just thinking. Shouldn't we keep Lady Penelope informed of all this? After all she played a major part in the launch of Zero X, I think she ought to be invited across for the return."

"That's good idea, son. I'll run the date through to her this evening." Jeff watched Virgil lean over the table and neatly sink his shot. "A good one, boy. Let's hope it's an omen for a

nice clean touch-down on Glenn Field when Zero X comes home."

"Say, Brad. Are you homesick?" Greg Martin glanced whimsically across from his instruments and looked the navigator full in the face.

"I sure am, friend. You ought to see my place in September. The cutest little farmhouse in the world. My wife, my kids... they've had twelve whole weeks to get it in apple-pie order for me."

"The first thing I'm gonna do when I get down is drink a tapful of fresh water," said Paul Travers. "This chemically purified stuff's okay, but it's nothing like the real thing. Then, believe it or not, I'm going to watch television. You know, those awful commercials? You really miss that corn when you've been away a spell. Say—do you remember that programme, 'The Mole Men of Mars'? I wonder if it's still running?"

"If it is, I guess we ought to package up the writer and producer, and send 'em to feed the rock-snakes. Mole Men! Oh, boy! "

Brad said: "I hate to mess up your little dreams, boys, but we're getting near entry point. Better start the routine."

Paul Travers smiled. The big curve of the earth's surface was there right in front of them, comfortingly close. Plenty of cloud about to hide the ground, but Glenn Field would be clear and sunny. Nice predictable weather in that part of the country.

"Doctor Grant, Doctor Pierce. You ready for reentry?"

The voices came back from the passenger compartment.  
"Okay, Paul. We're ready."

"Right. What's the computer reading, Brad?" "Computer reports, fire retros thirty seconds."

"Fine. Hello Ground Control. This is Zero X. Duplicate computer countdown, please. Now at twenty-five seconds."

"Roger, Zero X. All stand-by positions on green alert."

Outside, the sky began to turn deep purple, and Paul Travers knocked over the retro-switches as the green light flashed on beneath his hands.

The powerful rockets surged into life on either side of the craft.

"Observation station Goldstone reporting to Central Control and Zero X. Retros firing A.O.K. Reentry attitude correct."

"Woomera base to Central Control and Zero X. Verifying Goldstone's report."

"Johannesburg to Central Control and Zero X. Attitude indeed A.O.K. Entering Earth's atmosphere now."

Paul could imagine the electronic eyes beamed on his ship from the massive globe below. He shouldn't have allowed himself to feel in any way important, but he did. He was only human. He glanced round the impassive faces of the others, wondering how they were feeling.

"Heat shields into position, Greg."

"Roger, Paul. Activating now."

Thick metal shutters closed down over all the window ports and snapped the view from the three astronauts. Automatically, the flight-deck lights came on.

"Boy, we're taking some buffeting! After all that time in space, this kind of movement sure shakes you up." Brad Newman was self-consciously aware that he was gripping the arms of his couch painfully tightly.

"Zero X, this is Ground Control. What is your position and air-speed?" Greg read them off.

The wiry little radio operator in Ground Control turned to an internal link system. "Central Control, I am standing by to launch lifting bodies."

"Okay, Ground Control. Free to go."

The Ground Controller glanced from his observation window to the main runway at Glenn Field, where the two delta-winged lifting bodies were standing abreast. He leaned forward and threw a pair of levers, and immediately, the remote-controlled wings began to track forward, picking up speed with every second.

Then they were clear, and climbing steeply into the blue sky.

Moments later, there came the double bang as they broke through the sound barrier far above the field, "Central Control, this is Ground Control reporting lifting bodies away. Repeat, away."

"Roger, Ground Control. You heard that, Zero X? Lifting bodies now at fifty thousand feet and closing. Radio control over to you in five seconds."

"Your baby, Brad," said Paul, turning to his navigator. "Stand by to take 'em over."

One hand on each of two levers. Brad affirmed, listening as the Central Controller's countdown came clearly over the air.

Then. "Okay, Paul. Lifting bodies taken over." "Height, two hundred thousand. Boost retros." "Boost retros firing."

Greg Martin held up crossed fingers. "All systems go. Heat shield temperature normal. What's the rendezvous countdown, Brad?"

"One hundred and twenty thousand feet. Rendezvous achievement in twenty seconds. Reduce speed to Mach two."

Zero X, its outer shell bloomed by the friction heat, had planed out into a shallow dive through the upper atmosphere. Behind the huge craft, the two lifting bodies had planed out and were coming in fast, one above and ahead of the other.

The lead body swooped in at increased velocity until it hung just above the join between the M.E.V. and the main body.

"Steady, skipper. I'm bringing her in...."

The solid clang as lifting body one dropped into place echoed through Zero X, and the wing motors roared in protest at the new load beneath them. Then the second lifting body began to increase speed and converge on the tail unit.

"Speed constant. Remove heat shields." Paul Travers barked the order, and daylight paled the lights in the cabin.

“Steady now. Paul... keep her steady. Lifting body two directly beneath locks....”

Gently, Brad Newman eased up the control lever, and the rearward wings began to jockey their position. Then a warning light began to flash suddenly on and off in front of Brad’s eyes . . . , alarmingly, blindingly.

“Hold it!” His voice yelled at top pitch. “Somethings gone wrong! That fault ... the radio control system! It’s broken out! ”

Beneath the tail of Zero X, the second lifting body fluttered and slipped sideways. One wingtip came up to connect sickeningly with the locking devices, and there was the brilliant flash of yellow electrical flame!

“I can’t hold her! Everything’s blown!” Brad was screaming now, his fists white and bloodless on the controls.

Paul whipped round in time to see the second lifting body go diving away beneath them, its starboard engines pouring flame and smoke.

“Central Control, this is Zero X. Emergency. Repeat, emergency! We’ve lost lifting body 2 following a collision caused by a fault in the remote radio control unit.”

The Controller sounded calm. “Roger, Zero X. Sending up a replacement lift body immediately.” Paul looked quickly at Brad, but the navigator shook his head hopelessly. “It’s no use. Tell Central Control that the locking gear’s gone west. A dozen lifting bodies won’t help!”

Greg Martin’s hands sped swiftly over the bank of instrument checks. “Fuel systems go. All control systems go. Audio radio systems go. Radio control system dead ...”

His next words exploded like a bombshell in the cabin, and the sickening hand of fear laid itself squarely on the shoulders of every man in Zero X.

“Escape system ... my gosh! Escape system *dead!*”

Somehow, Paul Travers broke the awful paralysis of terror that threatened to hold him in his seat. “Where are the circuits, Greg? Quick—there’s not a second to lose.”

Feverishly, Greg Martin raced to the electrical control checkout box beneath the main fuses. He wrencheded it open. “There’s nothing wrong here... nothing! ”

Paul licked his lips slowly. “That means the fault’s outside. Somewhere around the junction of the M.E.V. with the main body.”

“The fire must have done more damage than we suspected.” Brad Newman spread his hands helplessly. “Not that the cause is gonna be any help. Whichever way you look at it, we’re dead men. Zero X is gonna crash . . . and there’s nothing in the world we can do about it! ”

Beneath them, the world, so recently a symbol of homecoming and achievement, had turned in a split second to a terrifying death-trap. Nothing short of a miracle could prevent them rushing to destruction at a speed way beyond the sound barrier, their craft, their bodies, all that their efforts had produced scattered to the four winds in dust under the impact of a terrifying, colossal explosion.

Slowly, Paul Travers realised that Central Control was on the air. Heaven only knew how many times the Controller had phrased the question.

“Zero X. Can you hear me? I repeat, can you hear me? What is your rate of descent and air speed?” “It’s—uh—stabilised at three thousand feet a minute. Speed, Mach one-point-two.”

“Can you slow down that rate of descent?”

“Not a chance. The motors are flat out.”

“Zero X. from Central Control. Roger. Stand by.” The Central Controller, his face white and strained, fed the details into the computer behind him. “Descent, three thousand. Speed, one-point-two.”

Then he pressed the button that illuminated the big wall map, and he caught his breath in horror. There, clearly and decisively, was the crash-path of Zero X, and the point of contact with the ground leaped out starkly.

Whirling to the console, the Controller snapped open contact with Emergency Headquarters. “This is Central Control. Alert Washington immediately. Zero X on crash course, touch-down position established as Craigsville, population four thousand eight hundred. Map reference zero nine, eight four zero. Impact time is thirty-five minutes, so you’d better move.”

“Roger, Central Control. Population evacuation to commence immediately.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

FROM THE VERY FIRST MOMENT that the second lifting body had failed to establish contact with Zero X, John Tracy had alerted the headquarters of International Rescue.

Now the lounge of the villa on Tracy Island was filled with the tense atmosphere of an operations room before some decisive battle, and the whole action membership of the organisation was there in front of Jeff Tracy's desk.



*... the whole action membership of the organisation was there in front of Jeff Tracey's desk.*

Jeff laid his hands flat on the desk top, palms downwards, and looked at each of his operators in turn.

"I don't have to tell you that this is going to be one of our trickiest operations. Zero X is coming in on one wing. She's unable to maintain height, and will crash in around three quarters of an hour.

"The most recent check of the control systems aboard shows that they have an escape unit failure, and unless we can get the crew and passengers out before that space craft hits the ground, they're all doomed men. Scott—you know what to do. Take Brains with you... you'll need technical advice."

"Yes, sir." Scott and Brains were already on their way to launch stations as Jeff turned to Virgil.

"Take pod four with the air-to-air rescue equipment and rendezvous with Zero X. Hold it a second..." Virgil had already begun to make for the revolving picture. "Alan. You'll go with Virgil. I want you to get aboard Zero X and fix that escape mechanism."

"Yes, sir!" Now Alan's eyes were alight with the prospect of action at last.

"And Gordon... you'll be needed, too. Off you go—and good luck. You'll need it."

Thunderbird 1 was already airborne as Virgil slid Thunderbird 2 out from the undercliff hangar. "Changing to horizontal flight, father. Setting course for Glenn Field." Scott glanced behind him at Brains, sitting in the rear cabin. Already, the scientist was busy with books and tables, making the calculations that might—just might save five lives.

In the lounge, Jeff heard the roar of the Thunderbirds' jets recede into the distance. Then the wall-painting of John began to flash.

"Go ahead, John. What's the latest?"

"Direct request from Glenn Field, father. They want our help."

Jeff nodded. "Tell them we anticipated their request, and we're already on our way. And John—get them to establish direct contact with Scott and Virgil."

"F.A.B., father."

The Central Controller at Glenn Field shook his head to think clearly. The focal point of the whole emergency, he was besieged by calls every minute. Now he had to instruct transmissions to close down, ignoring the protests of civil and air corps chiefs and commanders.

"Wavelength open only to Zero X and to International Rescue. Interruption can only further jeopardise the plight of those five men."

Now Thunderbird 1 was coming through. "Central Control, will you please relay rendezvous course to Thunderbird 2 on this frequency?"

"Roger. Thunderbird 2 from Central Control. Zero X present position is International Fix System 2404 on a bearing of 143 magnetic, this axis."

Virgil affirmed and threw Thunderbird 2 into a tight turn. Somewhere ahead of him, Zero X was coming down to destruction... fast.

Meanwhile, in the stricken space ship, a grim, fatalistic calm had descended upon the three crewmen on the flight deck. To such men, the possibility of sudden death goes with their jobs, and even when they find it staring them in the face, they manage to accept it quickly enough.

"I guess we'd better tell Tony Grant and Ray Pierce, Paul." Greg Martin glanced questioningly at his skipper.

As though the thought had been transmitted to the passenger compartment, there came the sudden click of the intercom, and Doctor Grant's voice came crackling over. "Hey, Paul. This is Tony here. What's going on? Something's wrong, isn't it?"

Paul Travers licked his lips. "Listen, Tony. You, too, Ray. We've got troubles... big troubles. But just remain calm, we're doing all we can."

"Keep calm! Come on. Paul—give us the complete picture. We can take it."

There was a dead silence as the scientists heard the whole of the ghastly predicament. And then Doctor Pierce muttered: "If only International Rescue had been with us this time, they might have been able to come up with something."

"That's just it, Ray," said Paul. "They are going to be with us—real soon. I've just heard from Central Control."

"By glory! That's great! Do you think they'll be able to get us out of this mess?" Tony Grant's voice was full of sudden hope.

Captain Travers glanced from Brad to Greg and then out of the observation windows. His voice was light, reassuring. But his eyes were dull and hopeless. "Sure they will, Tony. Don't

worry. Just you and Ray sit tight, and everything's gonna be fine."

The intercom clicked off, and Paul buried his face in his hands. "Why did I lie to them? Why didn't I tell them the truth? Even International Rescue can't work a miracle! "

"I think they can, Paul." Greg leaned forward eagerly. "You know and I know what sort of impossible feats they've pulled off over the past years. You name it, they can fix it. I reckon while we're still alive, there's hope."

"I sure wish I could share your confidence, Greg." Brad Newman slammed his fists together helplessly. "Somehow, this whole set-up seems so unjust. The whole uncertainty of the trip to Mars, the situation you guys licked when you landed... and now it's all going to end in one big bang. What the heck does it all mean? Why should it happen like this?"

The voice of Central Control interrupted the Zero X navigator. "Switch radio to channel four, Zero X. International Rescue require to make contact with you. Is that understood?"

"Roger, Central Control. Thanks." Paul Travers twirled the radio dial.

"Hello, International Rescue. Zero X awaiting transmissions."

"This is Thunderbird 1. Approaching Glenn Field to link up with spaceport Central Control. Will require constant verification of your height, rate of descent and air speed. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly. And buddy—you may as well know this. We're depending on you."

Scott Tracy didn't answer. The retros beneath Thunderbird 1 were firing now, and the rocket was making its touchdown on the runway at Glenn Field. Already, police cars were racing towards it, sirens screaming. An airfield truck hurtled along in their wake.

"Thunderbird 1, this is Central Control. Police guard converging on your position. Transport detailed to bring your equipment to control tower. Over."

"Roger, Control. See you in a couple of minutes."

On the open wavelength, Virgil Tracy, Alan and Gordon heard everything in the cabin of Thunderbird 2.

"I sure hope that Scott gets that mobile control set up quickly. We need his assistance to pinpoint Zero X."

"We must be getting pretty close by now, Virgil." Alan stood up. "I'll get my rescue gear on."

"Okay, Alan." The pilot half turned. "Gordon, you'd better get up to the astradome."

"F.A.B., Virgil."

Lady Penelope Creighton-Ward had booked into her hotel early that day. Freshened and changed, she stepped out into a foyer busy with excited chatter.

"What are they all talking about, Parker?" she asked, as the chauffeur came hurrying towards her.

"There's news in the air, m'lady, of the evacuation of a small town some fifty miles from here. A place called Craigsville. The mystery is, nobody seems to know why the place is bein' evacuated."

"Hmm. I thought there would be some kind of stir, Parker. I hope you haven't let slip any hint of the reason?"

Parker looked hurt and indignant. "Me, m'lady? Sealed-lips Parker? 'Ow could you think such a thing, m'lady?"

"Never mind, Parker. Is the Rolls ready?"

"Ready and waitin', m'lady."

Penelope left the hotel to its eager speculation, and climbed into the back of FAB 1.

"To Glenn Field, m'lady?"

"To Glenn Field, Parker."

The pink Rolls Royce did the forty mile journey in fifteen minutes flat, but the journey, as it turned out, was wasted.

The gate guard on the spaceport advanced somewhat menacingly from the barrier. Lady Penelope noticed that the red and white pole had been replaced by a double steel bar, trailing spike-chains.

"My pass, officer," said her ladyship, producing it. "Lady Penelope, of the—er—Universal Mirror."

"Yeah. I remember you, ma'am. Gave us quite a shaking about a year ago, and bust up our barrier, huh?"

The man had been joined by one of his fellows, and their hands, Penelope noticed, were conveniently near the butts of their holstered guns.

"You got away with it last time, lady," said the newcomer. "The security boys gave you some kind of clearance. Today,

it's different. We got our orders ... positively *no* press. Not here, nor anywhere in the vicinity of Glenn Field."

"You mean... ?" Lady Penelope tried to sound indignant.

"I mean blow, lady. Like, move. If there's a story here—an' I ain't sayin' there is—your paper's had it."

Penelope sighed. "Turn round, Parker. There's really nothing we can do."

As FAB 1 drove away, Parker grumbled audibly. "Not right. After what you did, an' all."

Lady Penelope tapped him on the shoulder. "Come now, Parker. I could hardly own up to having dealt with the saboteur. After all, my cover must remain unbroken. No, I only came to Glenn Field to be on the spot. It's not as though any undercover sabotage was in the wind this time. As far as International Rescue is concerned, this is a straightforward rescue operation."

Lady Penelope looked up at the vacant, inscrutable sky. "I wonder," she said thoughtfully, "how things are progressing."

"Anything new on the escape unit, Brad?" The Zero X navigator had been trying unsuccessfully for long minutes to find some way of activating the dead circuits.

"No joy."

"I sure wish we'd start hearing from International Rescue again," said Gregg. "Time's running out." "I'm still feeding the information they wanted over the air," Paul Travers muttered grimly. "There's been no acknowledgement, and

by my estimate, we've only been about twenty minutes before impact."

Then, suddenly, Scott's voice came over the radio. "Zero X, this is International Rescue Mobile Control. We're set up in the Glenn Field tower, and ready to go. Can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, buddy. What's the drill?"

Crouched over his console, Scott kept his fingers depressed on two buttons. "Zero X and Thunderbird 2 from Mobile Control. Transmit ten seconds of unmodulated carrier wave on this frequency, one at a time, please. You first, Zero X."

"Roger."

A high-pitched whine made crazy patterns on a screen in front of the Thunderbird 1 pilot. His hand turned a dial until the pattern became a single straight line running horizontally from left to right.

"Okay, Zero X. Now Thunderbird 2."

Again the whine, and this time the pattern ran from top to bottom of the screen. Scott dialled it down to a fine hair line, and marked the spot where the two lines intersected.

"Right. Cut."

Scott paused. And then... "Thunderbird 2 from Mobile Control. Steer zero, zero two. Fly at forty thousand feet, and with your present air speed you should sight Zero X in approximately four-point-five minutes."

"Okay, Scott."

The Central Controller looked anxiously across at the man from International Rescue. "What do you intend to do?"

"Well . . ." Scott was guarded. "We hope to put a man aboard Zero X, and if we succeed we may be able to fix the escape unit. Oh, excuse me..." Scott leaned closer to the mike. "Zero X, this is Mobile Control. Here are your instructions. They must be followed precisely if we are to succeed in rescuing you."

"You can count on it, Mobile Control. Go ahead."

"There are approximately fifteen minutes left before your space craft crashes. For the next ten minutes, lose as little height as you possibly can. Keep your aircraft steady, and watch the trim. In precisely ten minutes from now, switch to Automatic pilot and go, together with your passengers, into the escape unit."

"And then? What then, International Rescue?" "And then... hope! In the meantime, take further instructions from the pilot of Thunderbird 2." Paul Travers drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Mobile Control, this is Zero X. Your instructions have been received and will be complied with. Thanks."

"What are they gonna do, Paul?" Greg Martin's face was one big question.

"We'll learn more when Thunderbird 2 makes contact with us."

Scott shifted his position in his chair. "Thunderbird 2, this is Mobile Control. Turn on to zero magnetic. Zero X is approximately twenty miles ahead of you." "Scott!" Virgil's voice was high with excitement. "I can see it! Alan, Gordon, stand by. Zero X dead ahead!"

In the astradome, the air-to-air rescue compartment located on the top of Thunderbird 2's pod four, Gordon Tracy sat behind what could have been a conventional anti-aircraft gun. His hands were clasped tightly around a pair of tracking handles, and his right eye was already squinting along the criss-cross of the sights. Behind Gordon, Alan stood ready in his flying gear, air tanks strapped to his back and a breathing apparatus clamped to the front of his helmet.

"Activating astradome hatch now, Virgil." Gordon pressed a button by his elbow, and a metal shutter slid back to reveal the blue sky and the quick flashes of white cloud speeding by.

Virgil kept his eyes on the hurtling space ship ahead of him.

"Zero X, this is Thunderbird 2. We are coming in below you. Lower nose landing gear at once. We are going to put a man aboard and attempt to fix the escape unit."

In the cabin of Zero X, the three men looked at each other in amazement. "So that's what they're gonna try!"

"It's suicide! They'll never make it!"

Paul Travers silenced his men with a glance. "Lower nose wheel, Greg."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, Thunderbird 2. This is Travers. We are lowering nose wheel as instructed. Are you sure you wanna try this? It sounds mighty dangerous to me." "It is mighty dangerous," replied Virgil evenly. "And we do want to try. So hold her steady..." Above them, Gordon and Alan saw the tail section of Zero X loom overhead, dwarfing them. Slowly,

Thunderbird 2 slid under the shuddering belly of the space ship, until the lowered nose wheel came into line.

“Right, Virgil. Switch direct communication to me!” Gordon grasped the tracking handles of his gun more firmly.

“Okay—you’re in contact.”

“Zero X, I am about to fire an ultra-magnetic rocket into your nose wheel apparatus. Take her left... left one degree. Now hold it! Hold it right there!”

Gordon squinted through the sights. “Virgil... forward... okay, that’s it! Hold her steady... steady...”

The sights converged, and Gordon squeezed the trigger, feeling the backlash of the gun up his arms.

A small rocket, trailing a hyper-tensile line, flew from the gun barrel and struck home somewhere inside Zero X, just behind the nose wheel retracting gear. As it hit, the head spread out to a flat plate, locked on by incredibly powerful magnets.

“Made it! Direct hit! ”

From the tail of the limpet rocket, a pulley and secondary line ran back towards Thunderbird 2, and Alan reached up to grasp it. In a second, it was hooked securely on to his harness, and he gave Gordon the thumbs-up signal.

“Astrodome to pilot. All systems A.O.K. Take back contact with Zero X.”

“F.A.B., Gordon. Good shooting. Tell Alan to get going... he’s only got eight minutes.”

Alan Tracy took a firmer hold on his end of the travelling line, and gave it a testing shrug. Then his right boot swung upwards to the edge of the exit hatch.

He felt the slipstream of Zero X battering him mercilessly as he was hauled up past the sixteen-coupled tyres of the nose wheel assembly. He glanced quickly below him, past Thunderbird 2 to the clear definitions of the ground. He didn't like what he saw.

Then he was inside the hatch, and facing the complex mechanism containing the escape-unit operational circuits.

"Okay, Virgil. I'm in position."

"F.A.B. I'm connecting you directly with Brains. He'll give you the precise instructions you need. Take it easy, now."

In Mobile Control, Brains spread out a large blueprint in front of him. On it was every detail of the escape unit mechanism, down to the last wire. The International Rescue scientist clipped a headset over his hair and began to speak into the mini-mike by his lips.

"Listen carefully, Alan. On the right of the master cylinder that supplies power to the hydraulic system of the nose wheel assembly, you will find a yellow wiring harness. Follow this through to a red junction box marked E.U.C."

"E.U.C.," repeated Alan. "Okay, Brains. Got it." Paul Travers and his crew were aware that the man from International Rescue had been put aboard. Their pulses raced feverishly at the thought of survival... survival that had seemed hopeless only minutes before.

"Okay, boys." Paul Travers paused with his hand above the button of the internal intercom. "We'd better start

evacuation procedure. Doctor Grant, Doctor Pierce, can you hear me?"

"Roger. Is everything going to be okay?"

"Could be. Now hear this. I'm transferring you to the escape unit, is that clear? International Rescue are trying to correct our fault, but there won't be much time left for ejection if they succeed."

"Okay, we're ready."

The two couches in the passenger compartment, into which the two scientists were strapped, began to track backwards along a rail in the floor, until they both passed through self-operating hatches at the rear of the compartment. Then automatic lifts took them down and along, and locked them securely in place within the escape chamber.

"We're there, Paul." Doctor Pierce spoke into the flat microphone on the arm of his couch.

"Right." Captain Travers turned to his second-in-command and his navigator. "Brad, Greg, I'm sending you both back to the escape unit."

"Okay, sir," replied Greg. "I'm switching to automatic pilot."

Paul stopped him.

"No, Greg. Don't switch over. I'm staying here. I'll come back when we're at zero feet... but while there's a guy risking his life beneath us, my place is at the controls."

Greg gestured impatiently. "Then we'll stay with you, Paul."

"Yeah." Brad Newman nodded vehement agreement.

Captain Travers shook his head firmly. “No. There won’t be time for us all to get into that escape unit at the last moment. You two are going back now, and that’s an order.”

“Very well, sir. Come on, Brad.”

They paused for a brief second before operating their mobile couches. “Good luck, Paul.”

Below them, Alan was staring at the complex network of multi-coloured wires he’d exposed by removing the junction box cover. There seemed to be hundreds of them.

“It sure looks tricky, Brains.”

“It’ll be okay, Alan. Just listen to the instructions. Now place the transistorised radio induction unit you hold on the side of the junction box.”

“Okay. Got it.” A magnetic clamp had snapped the bulky piece of equipment he’d drawn from his pocket into place.

“Right, Alan. Now all you have to do is remove the screws that are anchoring the yellow and green wires, and reconnect them on one block, so that we get a direct link, green to yellow all the way down the bank. Is that clear?”

“I guess so.”

Alan lowered his hand carefully to his knee pocket and felt for his screwdriver. As he did so he looked down again, and his stomach gave a sickening lurch. The ground was so much closer... and whipping along no more than six thousand feet below. He closed his eyes and hung on grimly. He couldn’t allow himself to be overcome by vertigo now. Not now.

The sickness passed, and Alan drew up the screwdriver. Very delicately, he began to remove the screws, one by one. He dropped them for safety into the cup bend of a U-shaped metal strut by his face. "Give me a time check, Brains."

"Two and one quarter minutes."

Alan gritted his teeth and forced himself not to hurry.

The screws were all out now, and Alan began to twist the wires together as Brains directed. He could feel the perspiration running down his face inside the helmet, and it stung his eyes.

"About to replace screws, Brains."

Now his fingers were like lumps of putty. He couldn't feel properly. His hands were shaking. And the screws refused to go back into their sockets. Desperately, he guided them home, one by one.

"One minute, Alan."

His breath rasping in his throat, Alan dropped the final screw into position and reached for the screwdriver. His hand knocked it from the strut and it fell, to balance, teetering on a flat metal plate by his knee.

Gingerly, he stooped to get it back....

# CHAPTER EIGHT

FROM HIS POSITION behind the controls of Thunderbird 2, Virgil Tracy looked apprehensively at the ground below him. It was getting dangerously close.

“Gordon.” He thumbed the intercom button. “I’ve got to pull Thunderbird 2 up alongside Zero X. Play out more line for Alan, will you?”

“F.A.B., Virgil. I wish he’d hurry up there. What in the name of heck’s he doing?”

On the flight deck of Zero X, Captain Paul Travers, alone at the control, ground his teeth and asked the same question. “What in heck’s he doing?” Soon, the treeline would be brushing the front wheel assembly. Soon the first tearing of metal would herald the stupendous crash of the mighty space ship.

“Thunderbird 2 from Zero X. Is he through yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“I’m gonna over-run my engines. It’ll give us just those few more seconds.”

Paul Travers pushed the four levers in front of him through a red barrier line to the ends of their slots. Instantly, the motors of Zero X rose in pitch to a tortured crescendo.

Alan Tracy heard them, and clenched his eyes. Every change of sound was like a cold hand clenched round his heart.

His left hand grasped a strut above him, and his body was bent almost double as his right fingers tried frantically to

reach the fallen screwdriver. Now, as he opened his eyes again, he couldn't help but see the ground roaring past. Close enough to make out the individual tufts of grass in a fallow field.

His fingertips touched the screwdriver at last. And then the instrument rolled forward and disappeared from sight.

With a yell of rage, he whipped straight and grasped the last screw in his fingertips, guiding it so that it just held in its socket and no more.

"I've done all... He began the sentence, but never finished it. For at that moment, with a deafening explosive roar, the engines on the lifting body over his head burst into flame, and Alan Tracy dived headlong from Zero X towards the ground!

Instantly, Virgil threw back the controls of Thunderbird 2 and sent the machine into a crazy climb that flung Gordon back against the bulkheads like a rag doll. The flying line jerked taut, and with all the breath knocked out of his body, Alan was jerked short no more than six feet from the ground, to dangle and roll on the end of his cable like a mad puppet.



*Then it was down . . . bouncing from the ground with broken back, hurtling in a shower of flame and flying debris. . . .*

“Zero X from Thunderbird 2. Get into the escape hatch immediately, Travers! *Immediately!*”

Paul Travers hit the lever, and his couch sped backwards to its emergency station. Even as the door slid closed behind him, Virgil was yelling into the radio at the top of his voice.

“Now, Scott! *Now!*”

Scott Tracy, standing in Mobile Control, thrust forward on the big lever of the remote ejector mechanism that Brains had counter-wired.’ The circuits locked, and instantly, the escape unit of Zero X was shot clear, backwards and upwards, its parachute billowing out above.

Thunderbird 2 hovered immobile on its retros, and Virgil watched fascinated as the gigantic space ship that had made such an incredible journey between two worlds hit the tops of a line of trees. The craft, with its blazing engines trailing a thick curtain of smoke, scythed through them like matchwood. Then it was down . . . , bouncing from the ground with broken back, hurtling through the concrete of a tall factory building in a shower of flame and flying debris, smashing down a row of street lamps before it blossomed into the huge orange fireball of a devastating explosion.

It was long moments before all was quiet, and Virgil still sat there, his mouth slightly open. He was vaguely aware of Gordon standing beside him. “We’ve done it,” he breathed. “We got them out.”

“I helped,” said a voice over the intercom. And then. “Do you mind winching me up now? I’m kind of tired of hanging about down here.”

Virgil looked at Gordon, and they both grinned. “Bring him up, brother,” said the pilot of Thunderbird 2.

Gordon went back to the astradome, but returned shaking his head. "No dice, Virgil. The wrench must've jammed the mechanism. We're gonna have to drop Alan where he is."

"You hear that, boy?" Virgil chuckled into the microphone. "Don't worry. You can be picked up." Now it was Scott's voice, loud and clear above the radio. "You bet he can, Virgil. I've just had a buzz from Penelope, and she's in the area. As soon as I give her your position, she'll come and collect our hero of the day."

There was a buzz of faint conversation, as though Scott was talking to someone at his side, and then he came back. "Oh, Virgil. The Controller's just made contact on the direct radio link with the escape unit. They're all okay, though Paul Travers seems to be a little shaken up. He only just made it in time." "That's great, Scott. So it's congratulations all round, huh?"

Virgil grinned and settled back in his seat.

"Hey, you guys! I'm *still* hanging around here! Do you mind?"

"Aw, keep your wool on, Alan. You've got an extra-special reception committee about to arrive, and a real cushy ride back to town. Stand by to be lowered, and sing out when your feet touch!"

Alan couldn't believe it, but there it was. FAB 1, gliding gently along the country road towards him with Parker at the wheel and Lady Penelope in the back.

"Wow! This *is* an extra special reception!"

The car pulled up alongside him, and the door opened.

"Gee, Penelope, it sure was sweet of you to come here and pick me up!"

"After that brilliant performance, I think that's the least you deserve," smiled Penelope. "Now jump in." Parker cautiously backed the car around in the narrow country byway. "I assume, m'lady, that the first call will be Glenn Field, and then on to your 'otel. Is that correct?"

"Perfectly, Parker. And then you can make reservations for me at The Swinging Star."

"The Swinging Star!" Alan looked at her eagerly. "You mean you're gonna take me there... just the two of us?"

"Just the two of us."

Alan sat back, incredulous. "It's like a dream come true!"

"What was that, Alan?"

"Oh... er..." He flushed, guiltily. "Er... nothing, Penelope."

The Swinging Star was a huge and glittering nightclub, built in the shape of a giant globe. A balcony ran all the way round the 'equator' of the building, and on the balcony were star-shaped, silver tables.

Alan Tracy leaned back in his chair and looked admiringly across at Lady Penelope. A waiter had just finished pouring the last of the champagne.

"Gee, this must be the most memorable day of my life! You know, Penelope... he leaned forward confidentially... "they're always treating me like a kid back at base, me being the youngest, and all, but tonight I feel like a real grown man."

Penelope smiled warmly. "But you are, Alan. You are. Particularly with that snazzy moustache you're wearing. It adds years to you."

Alan blushed and put his hand up to his face, guiltily. "Well, er, you see we have to wear a disguise sometimes when we're out in public, just in case we're recognised. Do you really think it suits me?"

Lady Penelope nodded. Then she tapped Alan gently on the arm. "The next table," she whispered. "I think that gentleman's trying to speak to you." Alan turned. A distinguished looking man with a heavy beard was smiling at him, "Say, would you mind passing an ashtray?"

Somehow, the voice was awfully familiar... and then Alan realised!

"Father! It's *you* behind those whiskers! What in heck are you doing here?"

Jeff winked. "Just thought I'd come and congratulate you on your great performance today, boy." "Me, too, Alan." Scott Tracy removed a pair of dark glasses for an instant and waggled a dapper little french beard at his brother.

Alan sighed. "Thanks, Scott. And is that you, Virgil, behind those horn-rimmed glasses?"

"It is. Congratulations for another International Rescue success."

Another figure blinked rapidly at the young astronaut. It was Brains, without his glasses, "I, er, think it was a splendid effort, Alan... even though I can't see you. Shucks, Virgil! Can't I have my specs back now?"

Alan sat back and laughed. "Thanks, Brains. And I suppose the swish-looking girl with you is Tin-Tin with an auburn wig and dark glasses. Gee, it's nice of you all to come along... but there was I thinking we were all alone."

He turned his back apologetically to Penelope. She stretched across and gave his arm a reassuring squeeze.

"Remember, Alan. One of the most comforting feelings a man can have in this world of ours is *never* to be alone."

Alan sipped down the last of his champagne, grinned quickly round at his family, and stood up.

"Shall we dance, Penny? At least the dancefloor's only big enough for the two of us."

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